

**CURRENT 26**

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## **FROM BAAR I TO BAAR II**

**A REPORT FROM A CONSULTATION ON  
THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF OTHER FAITHS**

### **PREFACE**

**EXPECTATIONS FROM BAAR I TO BAAR II** 3

**THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALITY**  
Kenneth Cracknell 10

**BEING A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AMONG OTHER  
BELIEVING COMMUNITIES**  
Michael Amaladoss 23

**UNDERSTANDING AND WITNESSING TO CHRIST  
IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD**  
Jane Smith 34  
Anastasios of Tirana 43

**PARTICIPANTS' REPORT** 50

**BIBLE STUDIES**  
Kajsa Ahlstrand 55  
Sebouh Sarkissian 57  
Nan-Jou Chen 60  
Mark Heim 63

**LIST OF PARTICIPANTS** 67

**BOOK REVIEWS** 69

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## PREFACE

This issue of *Current Dialogue* contains the report of a consultation on the theology of religion held in Baar, Switzerland, from 3-8 September 1993.

There were twenty-five participants, many of whom came with extended experience in the practice of dialogue. All were involved in exploring the issues related to inter-religious relations in various ways, both in their ministry and in theological reflection and teaching.

The programme stream on the 'Theological Significance of Other Faiths' within Unit II and the Office on Inter-Religious Relations of the World Council of Churches, brought together the group. It proved to be a fruitful way of approaching the issues involved from two different aspects and practical experiences in both dialogue and mission.

The consultation was convened with the conviction that the WCC needs to give fresh impetus to the development of appropriate theologies of religion that will facilitate creative attitudes among Christians to people of other faiths. The urgency of the task was also accentuated by the increasing polarization, and even hostility, among religious communities in many parts of the world.

The statement of theological perspectives and affirmations prepared by an earlier consultation in Baar in January 1990, and the report of Section I of the San Antonio World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, provided the background for the deliberations. The 1990 Baar consultation ended with the words:

We feel called to allow the practice of interreligious dialogue to transform the way in which we do theology. We need to move toward a dialogical theology in which the praxis of dialogue together with that of human liberation, will constitute a true *locus theologicus*, i.e. both a source and basis for theological work. The challenge of religious plurality and the praxis of dialogue are part of the context in which we must search for fresh understandings, new questions, and better expressions of our Christian faith and commitment.

The consultation did not seek to issue any major theological statement or declaration. Instead, its objective was four-fold: first, to take stock and assess the state of the debate in relation to religious plurality; secondly, to identify and define more precisely some of the central questions and pressing issues involved in revisiting Christian faith perspectives and theological formulations in the light of plurality of faiths; thirdly, to indicate the programmatic implications in mission and dialogue for the World Council of Churches; and fourthly, to point to possible approaches and directions.

The participants were well aware of the traditional approaches to the theological questions in inter-faith relations and the familiar typologies of 'exclusive', 'inclusive' and 'pluralistic' Christologies. While the consultation recognized that it was important to examine the state of the debate within these frameworks, the desire to move beyond them and the need to explore different frameworks loomed large. They were mindful, too, of the pastoral needs of local churches and the concern to take seriously issues involved in inter-faith relations in processes of theological education and ministerial formation.

The discussion at the consultation was in three stages: first, consideration of a theological approach to the reality of religious plurality; second, exploration of the significance of being a Christian community among other believing communities; and third, working toward an appropriate understanding of, and witness to, Jesus Christ that is relevant to a religiously plural context. Each stage was introduced by one of the participants, followed by plenary and group discussions. Specific issues, directions and approaches and programmatic implications were identified in groups.

The work of the consultation was undergirded by worship and Bible study each morning. This issue of *Current Dialogue* includes most of the Bible studies presented at the consultation.

The consultation demonstrated the fruitfulness of bringing together persons who are committed to creative and wholesome relations with people of other faiths, but from two different approaches, namely mission and dialogue. There is often tension between the two. But the consultation confirmed what the San Antonio Report of the conference on world mission said: "We recognize that both witness and dialogue presuppose two-way relationships. We affirm that witness does not preclude dialogue but invites it, and that dialogue does not preclude witness but extends and deepens it."

In a small measure, the consultation in Baar in September 1993 pointed to ways in which dialogue and witness can be held together wholistically, as well as how issues in a theology of religion can be informed both by the practice of dialogue and involvement in Christian witness. This issue of *Current Dialogue* is a report of one such fruitful encounter.

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# EXPECTATIONS FROM BAAR I TO BAAR II

Concerns expressed and listed by participants to a consultation

- edited by Hans Ucko -

## *From Baar to Baar*

The former Dialogue sub-unit brought to the Seventh Assembly in Canberra the document "Religious Plurality, Theological Perspectives and Affirmations" from a consultation held in Baar, Switzerland, where in January 1990 some thirty theologians, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, met to interpret the theological significance of religious plurality. The consultation was called to give some theological considerations to the urgency of dialogue. There was a need to express respect and, where possible, affirmation of the religious experience of the other. Recognizing that God can and does act in saving ways other than the one we know, offered an interpretation of the Christian claim, rooted in Scripture and tradition, that Jesus is unique and the Christian conviction that Jesus and his life has universal significance.

The document "Religious Plurality, Theological Perspectives and Affirmations" of Baar 1990 dealt with religious plurality and christological thinking from a pneumatological perspective, thereby emphasizing the Assembly Theme: "Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation!" Although the Assembly in Canberra for various reasons (the Gulf War being one major reason, demanding rather an emphasis on interreligious relations than on a theology of religions) did not after all enter into the heart of the matter of religious plurality, it did underline the necessity that the question continues to be the object of study and reflection of the WCC. With the restructuring of the WCC in 1992, interreligious dialogue was bifurcated, aiming at a strengthening of interreligious relations as such and on the other hand, attempting a missiological reflection on the theological significance of other faiths. An inter-unit cooperation would then be able to bring into inter-action actual experiences of interreligious relations and a thrust of present missiological thinking on religious plurality.

The Office on Interreligious Relations and the Programme on the Theological Significance of Other Faiths within Unit II, Churches in Mission: Health, Education, Witness, set in motion a process of cooperation through the consultation on the "Theology of Religions" held in Baar in September 1993. Some 20 theologians, who from various perspectives were extensively involved in interfaith dialogue and in a theological reflection on religious plurality, came to Baar to take stock of where Christian theological deliberations are today and where they need to go in order to be

synchronous with the present state of affairs of the ecumenical movement and of the world today. The consultation had no intention of being a continuation of the ecumenical consultation on "Religious Plurality, Theological Perspectives and Affirmations" held in 1990. The scope of this consultation was less to make theological affirmations but more to identify issues, be task-oriented, guiding the programme into a process that is to oscillate between three foci:

- The fact of religious plurality and our celebration of and response to the triune God;
- The call to Christian community within the other communities of faith and the identity of the Christian community;
- The witness to Christ within the Christian community among the witnesses of other communities;

### ***Listing concerns***

At a meeting of Christian theologians, where lived experience and theological reflection, dialogue and mission, theology of religion and theology of mission, mutually interpenetrate one another, a context is provided for a process of a continued sharing of resources towards a common understanding of what mission and dialogue today might mean in the theological discussion. Discerning which direction to take in a theological interpretation of religious plurality requires a reading of the state of the nation, an inventory of concerns and a sharing of expectations. From their particular vantage-point and their particular contexts, the participants in the Baar consultation listed some issues to be reckoned with in a process of soliciting theological approaches to religious plurality, reinterpreting the Christian community among believing communities and seeking an understanding of the witness to Christ in a pluralistic world.

### ***The context of dialogue***

The context of dialogue is not neutral ground but, increasingly today, a context of suspicion and resistance. Some time ago African Christians called for a new programme within the WCC, a Programme to Combat Islam! In India Hindus militate against people of other faiths, particularly Muslims, holding up the vision of *hindutva*, the Hinduization of India. Throughout the world there are several fundamentalist Christian hit-and-run-campaigns vilifying the enemy, the Muslim, the Jew, the Buddhist. There are many unholy alliances between religion and politics. In such a climate, it becomes necessary to address the fears and anxieties concerning dialogue in member churches, since it is obvious that there are plenty of non-theological, e.g. psychological, factors at stake. The issue of dialogue touches not only theology but psychology. Christians therefore need to be strengthened in their faith not to perceive dialogue as a threat. Religious plurality should not frighten but should be a reason to rejoice, to be strengthened in faith.

Religious plurality is an issue in the churches, irrespective of the geography or demography of any church. Whether a church in India, where religious

manifold has been the order of the day since time immemorial, or a church in Sweden where religious plurality is a consequence of recent migration or people seeking refuge from political and social hardships, religious plurality is an issue that remains a theological challenge. For some time it may have been possible to emulate the ostrich, but asked to respond theologically, churches in Sweden or in India are confronted in the same way as they hold on to claims that seem to contradict the multi-faith appearance of today's society. Religious plurality is nowadays an inescapable reality, sharpened in a world that has become more and more polarized.

The experience of religious plurality calls the Christian community to recognize itself within the other communities of faith and assess its witness to Christ in a mode of mutuality and reciprocity. The former Moderator of the Dialogue Advisory Group, Bishop Krister Stendahl once formulated the task in the following way: "How can I sing my song of praise to Jesus without offending the other?" There is then a need for a pastoral concern in dialogue. The churches tell us repeatedly that sufficient theologizing on dialogue has been done. Tools are now needed to open the theology on dialogue, to help people to get a handle on what they already see and know. A pastoral concern and an emphasis on education is therefore needed. Theologians need to be challenged to take people on the ground seriously and to take the pastoral and educational concern seriously. People are asking theologians to help them be sufficiently equipped to live as a Christian community in the midst of other communities of faith. That is why we need to know where to move in order that education and theological formation be affected. We are unable to do anything when pastors are as they are, unformed for living in a pluralistic society. Ministerial formation is capital. Ministers are the ones who preach Sunday by Sunday in the churches. This reflects where the churches really are.

### ***Mission and dialogue held together***

If the tension of religious plurality and Christian celebration of Christ, as the unique expression of God, can be located as a *mysterion* within the triune God or be identified with the eschatological vision of God bringing *ta panta*, everything, together as a gathering up of all things, then our endeavour should already now be one of affirming together our theology of religions and our theology of mission. There are no two tracks to follow in real life. Lived experience have mission and dialogue together not separated. Bringing together in a conceptual way mission and dialogue, the following aspects need our particular consideration: the Christian claim of universal relevance, an acknowledgment of the genuine diversity of religious claims and a common space to be discerned.

Is then a new approach possible with a conscious linking of the tracks of mission and dialogue? The theological discussion in the ecumenical movement has made attempts in this direction. Reference needs to be made to *Missio Dei* as a concept for theological reflection on religious plurality. The kingdom or household of God reveals the dream of God of bringing all

together; the mission in Christ's way is a mission in self-giving and not in acquiring, grasping, taking.

The theology of religion must be one of one God, out of a faith which does not offend others and which does not lose its mission-perspective. We must therefore not leave the great responsibility of witness to any extreme definition of Christian witness. If we do so, we ourselves will lose the opportunity to be a real church.

***Dialogue with institutional cooperation between different religions in responding to current problems in the world***

In relations with people of other faiths we should seek more cooperation on issues of common concern, reflecting together with people of other faiths about global ethics and trying to find a minimal consensus. Working together could prevent us from carving out our own empires. The dialogue should deal with justice, peace and social issues and find ways of ministering to a secularized society. There are commonalities assisting us in finding ways to cooperate on social and ethical issues. We therefore need more a dialogue of work and less a dialogue of talk, a work-dialogue. In this connection we need to think of what an appropriate theology of religions means, the more so if we accept that the essence of theology is unchangeable. We are, after all, called to be faithful to the gospel and proclaim its uniqueness.

***Dialogue with sects, syncretic cults, modernity and secularism***

The growth of Pentecostal churches and syncretistic sects in many parts of the world can no longer be discarded. The Pentecostal churches have found their way into the hearts of people and are responding to their demands. This is a challenge for anyone used to dialogue with the major world religions and requires attention and serious consideration. It is important to remember the hiatus between mainstream churches seemingly advocating dialogue but losing people and Pentecostal churches, which look upon dialogue as a compromise and a contamination of faith, and which are rapidly gaining terrain. This alone tells us that we must not lose the zeal for conversations with Evangelicals on what we really mean by dialogue. The many religious movements need to be taken seriously. Dialogue with Pentecostal churches and syncretistic sects is a challenge. There is no institution or theological system. In dialogue with people belonging to syncretistic religious movements, there is a need to reflect on the phenomenon of syncretism itself. Is syncretism only a bad word or is syncretism the living dialogue going on inside any person of faith in his/her journeying in religiosity? It seems to be a fact that people today are **believing** rather than holding on to a set of **beliefs**, that there is a pilgrimage in religiosity. It seems that for such people 'believing' is more important than 'belief'! There is a quest for something which is beyond. Once we have realized this, we cannot even as easily characterize the secularized world as atheistic. We should instead learn to affirm values of the secular. There is not as much atheism as we believe. Instead it seems as if it is inside the

churches that there is a lack of faith. Mainstream churches seem unable to cope with the phenomenon of religiosity. Are the churches prepared to learn from the actual dialogue in life? Our model should much more be how the people live their religious life. The elite is not our model.

We ought to realize that we have one dialogue-partner above all, within ourselves, by the name of modernity. Whether we like it or not, we are all wrestling with modernity irrespective of our faith. Dialogue with modernity is not unrelated to a systematic theology with has a preference for the human dimension, insisting on a "jesology" rather than a "christology" or affirming that the christology-language cannot be ontological.

### ***The role of religions in dialogue and the self-understanding of the church***

How do we reconcile the mission of the Christian church and the presence of living faiths and the presence of obvious sanctity, of ethical behaviour and of concern for humankind? How can we bring the witnesses of living faiths into others' consciousness and understanding and yet avoid proselytizing?

It is often more difficult to relate to our own people who hold theological positions different from our own, than to relate to people of other faiths. How can we present our variations of Christian attitudes on mission and dialogue to people of other faiths? How can we break open and identify the evil that is takes place in the name of religion? And when doing so, can we do this from outside the tradition we belong to or are identified with?

The exercise of dialogue has given us a basically positive assessment of religion. This does not mean that we are naive. There is always ambiguity, there are always negative as well as positive aspects. But what implications does it have for the understanding of the church to have a positive assessment of other religions in the plan of God's salvation? In the field of theology of religions we need to reflect upon the role of the church. Is the church all those called by God? Is the church the final cause, is it to be fulfilled in the community of the saved? That the church is in the image of Christ drawing all to the Father? What are the practical consequences of such a vision of the church particularly in any eschatological dimension for the witness of the Christian community in a pluralistic world?

### ***The question of conversion from culture to culture***

There is a problem of moving from faith to faith. Conversion is a quality of life. What does conversion mean and what do the often affirmed rights of the people to their own religion and culture mean? What is the salvific significance of culture and religions?

The church in Africa lives between the African traditional religions and Islam. The church in itself is a pot-plant. The church relies upon external support. The pot prevents the flower from being rooted in the soil of Africa. The pot needs to be broken. But people love the pot as much as they love the flower



(gospel). The syncretism of Africa is rather the present situation of a gospel in a pot that is not African than dialoguing with African religions. African religions and Muslims are like Christians monotheists. We need theological guide-lines helping African Christians to break the pot, which is nice but which is not African and without creating a divorce with brothers and sisters in the rest of the world.

### ***A new way of theologizing and another theology***

Ritual, credal formulations, the structures of religious bodies is all relative in two ways, relative to be substantial transformation in human experience and relative as analogous. It is not capturing reality, it is parallel or analogous. It is bigger than that what we can capture. *Deus semper maior*, God is always more. We are all approaching the transcendent in ways that are suggested by our culture, language and historical experience. This is difficult for most believers wanting ultimate possession of ultimate truth.

Expressing ourselves today theologically calls for a new mode of theologizing, not in a propositional theology, but in a poetic theology. Here there is no room for defining away such as when we elaborate categories of relativism, inclusivism, exclusivism. We need a poetic theology also when speaking about soteriology, christology and ecclesiology.

The only thing that persuades people are the telling of stories which are in themselves poetic expressions. Getting our churches more widely involved in real dialogue and not argumentation, we need to have a theoretical wrestling, but even more the telling of stories, the faith-journeys of people of other faiths.

Our theories of pluralism express something which is greater than the form in which it is expressed. Salvation is not one, and only one, thing. The divine is greater and every religious life is specific, making my neighbour's life and mine specific. Faith is not static. Change, flux and transformation is normalcy. We should not accept a theology of religions and thereby accept status quo.

There has always been a history of dialogue in the church. Theology has always been in a continuous dialogue and it is imperative for the church to be in a dialogue, with reality as such. How can we persuade people that dialogue is not elitistic but part of life?

Religious plurality challenges the churches to develop a theology of pluralism, as something God-given and as having a positive value. In dialogue we often surround ourselves, as it were, with a horizon of unity and reconciliation. Can we acknowledge the difference among religions and see their differences as positive, and not at once as complimentary, trying to find how religions different from each other yet somehow hang together. Are we ready to face difference?

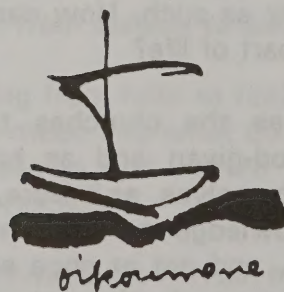
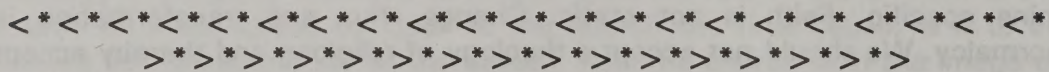
With a theology affirming pluralism, we would have come a long way from a theology of contempt of the other, to borrow from Jules Isaac, who coined the phrase: *l'enseignement du mépris*. But we have also come away from a state of tolerance, towards a theology which calls for mutual respect and preparedness for mutual change. Should not tolerance be enough? Paul Claudel once said: "*Pour cela, nous avons des maisons de tolérance*" (houses of ill-repute, tolerated by the authorities). You don't really accept, you tolerate, because there is no other way. We need more than mere tolerance. If we can go beyond tolerance, genuine, mutual respect of the differences will be assured and the excitement of a mutual understanding of change will become possible.

Can we thank God for the other as other, thank God that there are Hindus, Muslims, Jews? How can we express our affirmation of the other in hymns and liturgy, in teaching and catechism, in sermons and prayers?

Leaving religions to be dissimilar from our own, even if they were compatible, does not give us a right to co-opt them into our own categories or conceive a Christian end. Their difference is maybe more important than anything else and part of the providential. The different religious traditions are not like ours. We may in the end need not only a theology of affirmation but more a theology of silence.

***Religious diversity as God-given***

"A rich diversity of religious experiences and forms is one of God's greatest gifts to this world. But it requires from us the virtues of understanding and sympathy, humility and readiness to listen and to learn. Only then can we build a greater global unity in the spirit of faith, hope and love" (Robert Runcie).



# THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

- Kenneth Cracknell -

## PART I: WHY WE DON'T HAVE SUCH A THEOLOGY RIGHT NOW

Most of this year I have been completing a book about Protestant missionaries, and many of the reflections about why we do not currently begin with any common ground for the theology of religious pluralism arise out my writing and thinking about Anglo-American missions in the last three centuries.

The Protestant expansion into other cultures began relatively late. There had been people like John Elliot, David Brainerd and Jonathan Edwards at work among the Indians of Massachusetts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Pietist missionaries from Denmark in India, Moravians in places like Greenland and South Africa. But the discovery that there was an obligation to use means for the conversion of the heathen really did not take hold until 1792 when William Carey and others founded the Baptist Missionary Society, All the great Evangelical missionary societies began their work immediately after that date, sending thousands of heroic pioneers to the uttermost parts of the earth (from the European point of view). Almost all of these pioneers considered that the religion of the people to whom they went was heathenish and idolatrous, and was very swiftly to be given up to the moles and the bats. There were among them post-millennialists and pre-millenarians, pietists and rationalists, biblicists and revivalists. All of them set out with an intense combativeness in their hearts, prepared to overthrow Satan and his temples and shrines in the pagan world. But my chief concern has been with the scholars and theologians among them who discovered that their received theologies about other religions were wrong.

That process began at least a hundred years ago and we are still involved in it. In many ways we have not caught up with the changes initiated by the great pioneers. But my work has meant that I had to consider the background from which these western missionaries started and I have been forced to think about why was there so great a hostility towards other religions. Why was there such a violent enmity toward Islam and its prophet who was 'the great impostor', the offspring of Satan, the monster Mahmoud, and so on. Why did Hinduism appear to Westerners as nothing other than mere idolatry and childish superstition? Why were the Buddha and Confucius, and all the other sages impostors?

## LATIN THEOLOGY IN THE WESTERN CHURCH

Put in stark terms, the reason for such contempt for other people's religions and for so unyielding an opposition to them lies in the fact that the modern Missionary movement received its theology from the Latin and

Western Church. The Western Church (that is, the Church which had among its founding fathers figures like Cyprian, Tertullian and Augustine) had no way of saying yes to pluralism. Outside the Church there was no salvation. All religion outside Christ is a false idol and a figment of the imagination. Luther and Calvin, for all the remarkable insights of the Reformation, justification by faith, the priesthood of all believers, *sola scriptura* and so on remained Latin theologians, as were their followers down to the time of Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield, the great Princeton professors of a hundred years ago. Augustinian-Calvinist-Lutheranism had to say no because of its traditions and heritage.

But further elements came into play as the great missionary expansion of the nineteenth century took place. These I want to characterise as 'millennialism', 'pre-millenarianism', 'cultural superiority' and 'acute traditionalism'.

### MILLENNIALISM

One of the most important questions which missiologists have on their agenda is, what is the goal of the Christian mission? This is not just about what are its immediate aims, like getting as many converts as possible, but what is the ultimate purpose in gaining new converts. If Christians are challenged with this question, the answer must be one of these two things: either we are in the business of making the whole world into a Christian world. This is the doctrine known as 'millennialism', as expressed for example in Isaac Watts' hymn "Jesus shall reign wherever the sun/ doth his successive journeys run, His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,/ Till moon doth wax and wane no more", that is, for the whole inhabited world to become the domain of Christ. The Biblical warrant for this position is found in the Book of Revelation: "the Kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign for ever and ever", Rev. 11.15.

### PRE-MILLENARIANISM

The alternative position held by many other Christians denies this. 'No,' it says, "this world is never going to be saved and cannot ever be redeemed, because it is so fallen from grace and sunk in sin that Christian hope lies only another and better world elsewhere. Missionary work in this case involves programmes of extractionist salvation - souls have to be snatched out of this mass of perdition. That tradition goes back a very long way, at least to the New Testament, see Jude, v.23. The great exponent and enforcer of this tradition was Augustine. He never lost his original Manichaeism, with its dualism, which setting of opposites, light and dark, flesh and spirit against each other. This present world, the domain of the flesh and of the Devil, could never be for him a locus of salvation. Redemption could only be from out of this world. Thus the whole of his great work *The City of God* is dedicated to the proposition that there will never be an earthly reign, a millennium in this world. Christians accordingly are to aim to prepare souls for the eternal city, whose maker and builder is God, and so to deliver them out of this world.

In the nineteenth century this doctrine turned into millenarianism or pre-millenarianism (there are various titles for it): missionaries abroad and evangelists at home alike believed that the task was to save as many as possible before the final coming of Christ: "and this Gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, as testimony to all nations and then shall the end come", Matt 24.15. Though the thinking here has lost the sense that every knee will bow in reverence and joy to Jesus as ruler of this world, it still says an equally firm no to any possibility of religious pluralism. An elect but faithful 'few' must be gathered for an everlasting life in the heavenly realm in which there will be one Lord, and one faith and one baptism.

When I ask today missionary candidates which of these two goals they expect to be pursuing, they are very likely to reply both. But in fact this is not possible. Christians must aim ultimately at doing one or the other. They are either saving souls for eternity, and thus leaving this world to its own destruction, or they are part of the enterprise of 'humanisation' and 'shalomization', those jargon words from any earlier period of the missionary thinking of the WCC, which indicated concern in the 'sixties and 'seventies for the salvation of this world. With this kind of missiological expectation Christians act in order that this world may become a place of blessing and love and harmony, in which there will be 'justice, peace and the integrity of creation'.

#### FEWNESS AND RESTRICTEDNESS

As a kind of coda to the remarks on the Augustine position we can add that those who follow it normally assume that very few souls will be saved. The older mentality made no allowance for the activity of God in those men and women outside the "chosen few". It also insisted these few must adhere to restricted code of behaviour, and must impose this code by force on any with whom they had to deal. Thus Quakers were hanged by the New England Puritans on Boston Common in 1659-1661. But the Massachusetts Bay colonists had themselves been excluded and persecuted by a dominant religious group. Yet as soon as they became a dominant religion they were violently exclusive. 'Restrictedness' and 'fewness' belong to Latinate theological traditions like Augustinianism and hyper Calvinism. In such material we notice how constantly the theme appears that very few will be saved, particularly in western missionary and evangelistic writings, from Carey's period right to the present times. But there appears to be no adequate justification for such notions in the teaching of Jesus and breadth of vision of St Paul for building and fewness and restrictedness into the Christian theological fabric. I am trying hard to make this a theological rather than a pathological survey, so that deeper reasons why people want to be exclusive and not to have anything to do with other people, must be left to the province of social psychologists. However that be it is clear that Latinate theology runs in the tramlines of the thought that there is a limited number of the elect, or to use Karl Rahner's term, a *Heilspessimismus*, a pessimism about salvation. Hence the phrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, 'outside the Church there is no salvation', as the Council of Florence stated in 1438-45: not only 'pagans, but Jews also, heretics and schismatics, will

go into eternal fire, which was prepared for the devil and his angels unless they are gathered into the Church before the end of life.

At this point several different moves can be made. One of our Roman Catholic speakers made just such a one this morning, when he said 'the Church is the company that is going to be saved in due course' and there is no restriction on its number. Calvinist missionaries also eventually came to the conclusion that, yes, the number of the elect is as great as the extent of those who will be saved and that, therefore, they had no need to preach as though the number was restricted. ('We make,' wrote John Cockin to a Methodist theologian in 1815, 'the decree of election as extensive as actual salvation, therefore in our plan the multitude of the redeemed is as great as yours...') A recent book by the leading Canadian evangelical scholar Clark Pinnock book *A Wideness in God's Mercy": The Finality of Jesus Christ in the World of Religions* (1992) argues that it is not necessary to speak of a any fewness or restrictedness in God's purposes. The Bible, as he demonstrates magnificently, is open to other and more generous interpretation.

### **CULTURAL SUPERIORITY AND ENLIGHTENMENT RATIONALISM**

But there were yet other factors operating in the missionary movement. One is the radical monotheism which is apparent in Judaism and Islam as well as in some other traditions allows only for one way to the Eternal God. Everything else must by definition be idolatry, the worship of a false god. In other words 'if you are not going to God my way, you are not going to God in any way'. This was coupled in the modern missionary movement (from the eighteenth century onwards) with the enlightenment, rationalist notion that it was simply stupid and superstitious, "unenlightened' and 'benighted' to believe in any other God than the Christian God. So missionary literature and its attendant hymnology continually puts down all other religion.

For nineteenth century missionaries the worst place of all was Africa, where they could not see what was under their noses, namely the rich spirituality and humanity of African peoples. The texts in the nineteenth century repeatedly tell us: the African has no idea of God, no concept of prayer, no word for love and so on. Some writers even suggested that Africans were barely human. It is particularly unpleasant because the underlying rationalism implied that people without literature, have no culture. The German scholar Emil Ludwig asked even in this century. "How can the untutored African conceive of God?". Westerners saw the world as divided between the cultured and the civilized and those to whom the benefits of culture and civilization were denied. Illustrations in missionary periodicals and magazines, magic lantern slides, anecdotes in promotional literature, the kind of things that the missionaries said when they returned home allowed the Christian community in the West to have no sense that Africans were human beings of great dignity and great traditions. Other religious traditions fared slightly better because they had at least written texts to produce, but even so the prevalent imagery of India and China is of 'superstitious priests' and 'heathen idolaters'.

## ACUTE TRADITIONALISM AND INFLEXIBLE ERUDITION

The last factor to which I draw attention is "acute traditionalism". The conception of Christianity in the heads of European and American missionaries in the nineteenth century was that revelation had already been imparted in a complete form. The task of theologians was to be exegetes of and interpreters of what was already fully given, the *data* or *dogma*, the 'givens' of the revelation. In 1823 Isaac Taylor, a British Congregationalist divine, wrote that theological study was appropriately arduous and unexciting: 'the toils of learned acquisition indispose the mind to the wantonness of speculation, and impart to it rather the timidity, the acquiescence, the patience which are proper to the submissive exposition of an authoritative rule of faith' (*The Natural History of Enthusiasm*, p.79). This attitude is, however, to be found not just among the Protestants, but among Christian communities everywhere. Teaching from those with such attitudes never bends and never compromises. It is erudite and learned, but unimaginative and stiff. For the inflexibly erudite there are never exceptions, never any special cases, never any items of new information which cause new thinking. If you tell the inflexibly erudite that something exists which does not fit into their system and which is an exception - you soon discover that it isn't an exception. Even Karl Barth could operate like this. There is the famous story of Barth saying to the Sri Lankan Methodist leader, D.T.Niles, 'Other religions are unbelief'. Niles asked, 'How many Hindus, Dr Barth, have you met?'. Barth answered 'None'. Niles said 'How then do you know that Hinduism is unbelief?' Barth replied '*A priori*'. Much lesser thinkers operate with much worse a prioris.

These are some of the reasons why the WCC and its constituency have never yet been able to address religious pluralism or plurality with any sense of a common mind. The domination within the western missionary movement of the attitudes I have specified in Western Europe and North America and Australia and South Africa means that there is no commonly received theology of religious pluralism available to us as we begin our work in this consultation.

## NEW BEGINNINGS

Accordingly we shall not be able to effect any changes in this situation and develop a new theology of religious pluralism, unless there comes into play a series of new factors which can prize open the previous closed systems. Many of us here can point to moments in our own experience and personal history that transformed our own conception of where God has been at work in the lives of women and men who are unrelated to the communities of Jesus Christ. I could describe in detail the forces that broke in upon me as a missionary among the Igbo people of Nigeria and stopped my own inherited traditional (Methodist) theological system from functioning in an exclusivist and combative manner, I owe so much to my discovering the presence of God in the traditions and the life of the Igbo people together with what they taught me about community and the individual, and the interconnectedness of community, individual and God. Most people don't have that experience and here lies our first problem in this consultation.

How do we engage the thinking of our constituent churches and their leaders and theologians in the finding of a new theology for religious pluralism when they have so little first hand experience of encounter with the faith and practice of other people?

### **THE MISSIONARY EXPERIENCE**

Many missionaries in the nineteenth century had similar life-changing experiences to mine and arrived at theologies which were able to affirm the presence of God in other religions (with the help of some exceptional nineteenth century theologians (F.D.Maurice, B.F.Westcott, A.M.Fairbairn, and in America, A.V.G.Allen and C.C.Hall) who were rediscovering the pre-Augustinian Greek fathers (Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen). In China and Japan James Legge, Timothy Richard, Karl Ludvig Reichelt and Arthur Lloyd, in India T.E.Slater, Bernard Lucas, J.P.Jones, Robert Hume, J.N.Farquhar and many others were pioneering new and generous understandings of the faith of other men and women. Much of this work surfaced in the World Missionary Conference Report *The Missionary Message in relation to Non-Christian Religions* in 1910.

The new and generous understanding to be found in this volume of the significance of other faiths remained however entirely within the millennialist framework. Jesus would indeed reign supreme in all the earth, but now instead of radical displacement of the old religions. These faiths would soon move into Christianity and Christ would become the crown of Hinduism, the Cross would be superimposed on the Lotus, and Confucius would be seen as having pointed to Christ. That, missiologically, is where we have all been for the most part of this century. But now the problem is that few Christians now operate very easily with millennialism. The times have changed and we are no longer as optimistic as the mothers and fathers who gathered at Edinburgh in 1910. We cannot begin to imagine how every knee will bow at the name of Jesus within our lifetimes. We marvel at the confidence with which John R.Mott called his study book in 1902 *The Evangelisation in the World in this Generation*. Yet even he did not seriously think that the whole world would become Christian within the next thirty years. He did, however, think it was possible to tell the story of Jesus to every living creature in his generation, say by 1930..

Nevertheless we human beings are bound to think about the future and what we expect to happen determines our planning and our actions. Accordingly I address in the second part of this paper this question: If the evangelisation of the world in our generation (that would be between 1993 and 2223) is no longer on the cards, what are we expecting to happen to our multi religious world?

### **PART II: FOUR SHAPES FOR THE RELIGIOUS FUTURE**

I want to suggest now that there are only four possibilities for the religious future of humankind. In no particular order of likelihood they would seem to



be:

- 1) The ultimate triumph of one religious tradition over all others;
- 2) The deliberate creation of a new deliberately syncretistic religion, in which all people are enable to find fulfilment;
- 3) The conscious decision by religious communities to live and let live, within various forms of splendid isolation;
- 4) Something as yet to be guessed at, a wholly new action of God, to which I give the wholly ungrammatical code name 'You ain't seen nothing yet'.

#### **ONE RELIGIOUS TRADITION WILL TRIUMPH OVER ALL OTHERS**

Many people in our churches still believe that their own form of faith, Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal or Catholic will prevail over every other form of faith. Others of us, not quite so certain that all the truth has been given to our form of the Christian church, still go on trusting that Christianity in some ecumenical form will come to be the one religion of the world. It may take longer than this generation. We may not know how to accomplish the task. It may depend upon a new act of God, and a new Pentecost but one day, every town and every village, in every continent and in every country, every living human being will bow to Christ on this earth. To be sure this is a possibility, however improbable as it seems to most Christians in 1993. In this case the Church as we know it now will be still recognisable, with the historic creeds still determinative of the faith, with the Fathers all intact, and perhaps (here we will choose according to our predilections), Christians will be reciting the *filioque* or may be not, baptizing infants or may be not, ordaining women priests or may be not, singing Charles Wesley's hymns or may be not. However that may turn out, the world wide faith will be Christianity as we recognize it now.

Christians, however, are not by any means the only people who believe that one tradition will flourish at the expense of all others. The greatest part of the Muslim is assured that one day Islam will reign supreme throughout the earth, that the *dar al-harb* will become the *dar as-salaam*. Other eastern traditions are equally sure that all people will come round to their view of things, and that, for example Hinduism will find a place for Christ and for Confucius and will subsume both Islam and Buddhism.

#### **THE DELIBERATE CREATION OF A NEW RELIGION**

A second possibility is that humanity discovers resources of the wit and wisdom in our generation create a world faith that will satisfy everybody. Well, certainly, it could happen. In the celebrations of the centenary of the World Parliament of Religions in Bangalore and in Chicago they were talking of that as a possibility even last month. But this is essentially a deliberate and intellectualist syncretism, and such criticisms as I have heard of the formation of 'a global ethic' suggest that the time is not yet ripe to achieve such a human synthesis. I believe that Dr Stanley Samartha had a wonderful phrase for some of the suggestions and proposals made in Bangalore last

month. He called them concoctions of ice-cream and jelly pudding. But the question remains whether it could be possible to create a religious framework appealing to all humanity, which would be more than a concoction of jelly and ice-cream, Such a framework would have to come close to the heart of all the great communities of faith and draw deeply upon their most profound insights and passions. However much I personally believe that this is but a dream and delusion, scholars and saints of many traditions will go on exploring this idea.

### **AN AGREED PLURALISM**

A third possibility is that all followers of religious paths arrive at an agreed pluralism. This ideology would hold that while any religious community would remain utterly convinced of its own truth, it would admit that it had to exist and understand itself as just one community within a 'community of communities'. This last expression reflects the formulation of the Chiang Mai consultation in 1977 which were taken up in the WCC *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* of 1979. That is in truth only about as far as the Roman Catholic declaration *Nostra Aetate* had got to in 1965: 'Ever aware of her duty to foster unity and charity among individuals and even among nations, [the Church] reflects at the outset on what human beings have in common and what tends to promote fellowship among them'. The recognition of other communities of faith follows largely upon these lines, in order that the bonds of friendship between different peoples may be strengthened. Neither *Nostra Aetate* nor the 1979 WCC *Guidelines on Dialogue* contains more than an incipient theology of religion and it is unwise to try to read the present-day formulations of theology of religion within Roman Catholic circles back into *Nostra Aetate*. This is the argument of the Finnish scholar, Mikki Ruokanen in his detailed study *The Catholic Doctrine of Non Christian Religions according to the Second Vatican Council* (1992). Similarly the WCC *Guidelines* in 1979 posed more questions than they answered when they spoke of a 'community of communities'.

All this would suggest that in this Consultation we have still to fight for an adequate theology of religions to take us beyond pluralism. Until now the most that Christians have been able to achieve is a vision of a community of communities, in which to be sure there is human value and dignity. We need to be able to say unequivocally that God has been at work in the creation of the communities and that God is still at work in the creation of a 'community of communities'. In passing we could perhaps note that Christians could be more generous than they sometimes are and allow (with Jewish theology) that other religions abide within the Noachite covenant (Gen. 9). We could even allow that in every people and community of faith there are 'Cornelius souls' who 'fear God and do justice', the righteous ones who are *dektos*, 'acceptable' to God (Acts 10.34). But as a possible theology of pluralism even such positive suggestions still remain within the framework of an 'agreed pluralism'.

### **'YOU AIN'T SEEN NOTHING YET'**

The last position is the one which I hold. It derives from the fact that as

Christians we live always with something before us, something still promised to us, which as yet we do not possess. 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face: Now I know in part, then face to face...' 1 Cor.13,12. Christians expect even more an *Eschatos*, an appearance in the end time of One whom we believe to be deeply personal, indeed the very ground of our being. (Traditionally Christians have spoken of the Last Things, *ta eschata*, but it is surely preferable to use the term *ho eschatos*, literally the 'last one' to *ton eschaton*, which is the usual theological word for the end, which is not in the New Testament at all. For *ho eschatos* is, see Rev.1.17, 2.8, 22.13.) By thinking of the Eschatos I mean to point, with many other Christians, to the fact that 'I ain't seen nothing yet', that everything about our present understanding and perception is temporary and time-bound, and will in due course be transcended by greater truth. Christianity is for those who think like this by its nature eschatological, a principle of hope. As Christians we are always *in via*, always on the way, always travelling towards the future of God which will almost wholly surprise us. Indeed, 'We ain't seen nothing yet'!

#### BEING AS COMMUNION: PERSONS IN RELATIONSHIP

But in this process of movement toward the unknown future of God, Christians do have some distinctive clues. Here I would like to use two phrases from two very different theologians, one Orthodox and one Reformed which sum up for us the nature of these clues. "Being as Communion" make up the English title of a book by the distinguished Greek theologian, Bishop John Zizioulas. The phrase is the title of a work by the Scottish philosopher, John Macmurray: "persons in relations".

Both authors remind us that we are persons only and always as we are in relationship and in communion. As Zizioulas writes, 'the only way for a true person to exist is for being and communion to coincide'; Macmurray adds the further thought, 'The unity of the personal is to be sought in the community of the "You and I"'. For both thinkers the otherness of God and the otherness of other person are determinative of our very being. We grow as people because of the "significant other" (the wonderful expression which formed the central theme in Dr Kaisa Ahlstrand's meditation last evening). We are this way because we are not intended to be what Kierkegaard called "the single one". We are rather called to exist in relationships. Now relationships imply plurality; by definition, to have a relationship means the presence and response of the other. Here following Zizioulas we stumble upon the mystery of the doctrine of the Trinity, expressing our understanding that God is eternally in relationship, in communion. To quote Zizioulas again: 'The triune God offers in himself the only possibility for the identification of being with communion. He is the revelation of true personhood'.

God as triune is always greater than natural theology, logic or mathematics can conceive; is always greater than the single unmoved mover, existing from and to himself alone. God is *semper maior*, always beyond our conceptualizations, and this we never forget, but our Christian *Allahu Akbar*

indicates that complexity rather than simplicity is at the heart of the Being of God. Zizioulas has pleaded that we should not be afraid to face the differences between trinitarian and other forms of monontheism. The Trinity, he writes, teaches us that unity should be conceived personally and relationally'. I would only want to add that we should not be afraid of using our Trinitarian understanding to postulate a future where plurality and complexity find a new unity, in which all humankind participates in the life of the triune God.

But such thinking must not be Christian triumphalism creeping in by the backdoor. Such insight as is given us that God's being is relational and 'in communion' is only a clue to the personalist shape of the future, in which there is not an *eschaton* but an *Eschatos*, One whom Christians know in part through Christian revelation, but who waits to give us more than eye has seen or heart has conceived. We may be fairly certain that what the future holds will not be anything like the Christian frameworks in which we live now.

### **PART III: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF PLURALISM**

Since these are fundamental insights derived from our deepest understanding of the nature of God, we may expect them to be consonant with other and converging patterns of reflection upon the situation of the Church today. Since also our own constituencies are many and diverse within our national and denominational settings we need to be able to articulate as many ways as possible of an appropriate theology of plurality.

Indeed when we theologize about pluralism, we need as much help as we can get from whatever source. The third part of this presentation suggests areas into which we must venture in order to establish a working theology for the challenges that face us.

Again in not in any particular order of priority these I see as 1) reflection on religious freedom;

- 2) dialogue with 'secular' human sciences;
- 3) rediscovery of the 'grand tradition' within theology;
- 4) fresh understanding of the Biblical witness about plurality;
- 5) new work on the meaning of conversion and syncretism;
- 6) a theology of inter-religious friendship.

### **MODERNITY AND ENLIGHTENMENT: THE CASE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

I remember attending a conference of Christians and Muslims in Rome about human rights. After some days of lectures and discussions it became clear to us all that the conception of human rights was an invention of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, i.e the period of the Enlightenment or 'Age of Reason' in Europe. Neither the Christian nor the Muslim human rights record is spectacular (to say the least), and neither faith community, historically, has had any real commitment to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which speaks of the right to propagate, practice and change one's religion. There are many places in the world

including India, Northern Ireland, Nigeria, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, where what is needed most is a good 'secular referee' to intervene between the 'licensed lunacies' of competing religious groups. 'Human rights' are very well interpreted as a good and appropriate tool for enabling people of all religious communities to break out of their inherited tribalism and deep seated prejudices. Religious attitudes soon become exploitative and aggressive, as Dr Dyanchand Carr has already vividly reminded us. We all need secular help in coming to terms with religious pluralism, and it might be that we return to theme of religious freedom as a *theological* discussion.

### **THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE**

We need a new doctrine of the human situation, a new theological anthropology, in which all the issues of social ethics, human rights, ethnic identity and human freedom, are all treated afresh in light of the sociology of knowledge. Dr Leonard Swidler puts this well when he writes that the notion of truth has itself become destabilized in the recent times: 'Whereas the notion of truth was large absolute, static, and exclusive up to the last century, it has subsequently become deabsolutized, dynamic and dialogic - in a word "relational"' (in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (1987), p.7). He suggests four reasons for this: the historicization of truth, especially in regard to the future where intentionality and action are now seen to play a major role, the sense of limits of language, especially in regard to talk about the transcendent, the modern study of hermeneutics in which all truth and all knowledge is seen as interpreted truth and interpreted knowledge, and the insight of the discipline known as the sociology of knowledge in which truth is deabsolutized in terms of geography, culture and social standing, and I would add, gender. These 'relativizations' are essential ingredients in the contemporary discussion of the theology of plurality.

### **DIALOGUE WITH CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

Third, it is vital in our search for a theology of religious pluralism that Christians remain in touch with the tradition (otherwise we are lost to the tradition and become something else. We do need to enter into dialogue with our traditions. When I spoke earlier about inflexible erudition about tradition I was not wanting to belittle erudition in itself, merely its inflexibility. I would wish my students to be a lot more erudite than they are about Irenaeus, Cyril of Alexandria, the Cappadocian fathers, Aquinas, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, the Cambridge Platonists, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, Friedrich Schleiermacher so that these and many others might have a conversation with us, enabling us to gain formidable insights from earlier traditions about the handling of 'other' religion and philosophy.

### **PLURALITY IN THE SCRIPTURES**

But above all there is a much longer conversation to be held with the Biblical record. One of the most useful books to help us here is one to which I have already referred, Clark Pinnock's *A Wideness in God's Mercy* where he looks again the Bible (focussing on much the same material I tried to deal with in my *Towards a New Relationship* (1986)). For my part I rejoice

to have discovered in the Bible an 'eschatology for religious pluralism'. This is to be found in the Book of Revelation with its description of the City of God in chaps. 21 and 22. Into the City all the nations will bring (voluntarily) all their honour (*time*) and all their glory (*doxa*), and there shall find healing and restitution. Some of this discovery I have described in chapter 3 of *Towards a New Relationship*

### CONVERSION AND SYNCRETISM

In this context we need to think again about conversion, if we have meant by this the notion that this is transference from one community to another. I often wonder what we are celebrating in the West on January 25th each year, the feast of the conversion of St. Paul. Did he become, after he had encountered Christ on the Damascus Road, an 'ex-Pharisee' or did he remain what he was before, a Pharisee, but a Pharisee with an enlarged vision and a new experience? Luke thought it was the second of these: he recorded Paul, on trial before King Agrippa, as saying "according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee, and now I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made to our forefathers' Acts 26.5. And Paul's own testimony in his letter to the Romans is that he could wish himself accursed for the sake of his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh, Rom. 9. His Jewishness abides. In a modern context I have seen my colleague the Revd Inderjit Bhogal, a Methodist minister in Britain, raise his arm in order that all could see the Sikh band still on his wrist. Inderjit Bhogal proclaimed by this action that he is a Sikh who has become a Christian, yet remains a Sikh.

Accordingly we must reflect on the necessity (as it has been perceived until now) to move from one community to another if and when our religious horizons expand? A theology of plurality needs to reflect on the considerable wealth of experience of men and women who have lived within several religious frameworks synchronically, as in China, with its three religions Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, or as in India throughout much of its religious history. Westerners normally insist that choices have to be made but often Eastern ways of thinking would see no such necessity. Westerners must ask themselves if they could just be wrong. So more work needs to be done on the meaning of conversion, and on the possibilities of living in more than one community of faith.

### FAITHFUL SYNCRETISM

Along with rethinking about conversion there needs to go a new appraisal of what is meant by 'syncretism'. Now in WCC circles syncretism is a terrible 'ya boo' word. The first WCC General Secretary, Willem Visser t'Hooft wrote harshly (under the sway of Karl Barth) against syncretism in his small but influential work *No Other Name* (1963). Three years ago the Australian scholar of religions, Victor Hayes, an Australian scholar, examined the usages of the term syncretism in the present century. Recently he has published his findings in a marvellous paper entitled "Faithful syncretisms in inter-religious encounter" to be found in Norman C.Habel (Ed) *Religion and Multiculturalism in Australia* (1992). Rather than settling for the use of

syncretism as an instantaneous term of abuse Victor Hayes suggests that we move into 'faithful' syncretism, especially in the context of inter-religious encounter, where he says 'we have before us the choice between stultifying dogmatism and an enriching faithful syncretism'. Similarly Stanley Samartha has referred to what he calls a 'Christocentric syncretism' in his *One Christ - Many Religions*.

### A THEOLOGY OF INTER-RELIGIOUS FRIENDSHIP

From my own experience the best thing about living in a context of religious plurality is that it gives one unexpected but precious friends. I know this cannot be everyone's experience but because Britain has become so massively a religiously plural culture, I have so made many friends I never thought I would have. My experience is just one of many in which Christians become absolutely certain that God has touched other people's lives, because we know people of different faith as *friends*. This experience transforms our previous relationship and enables us then to talk as friend to friend about the deepest things. From the Christian point of view this the most (and some would add the only) appropriate form of witness. When those in my own constituency suggest that I have given up on evangelism because I am advocating dialogue I ask them, 'when did you last talk to a Hindu, a Muslim or a Jew or a Sikh or a Buddhist about Jesus?' My answer to this question is usually easy to make, because I know almost exactly when I last did that in a context of friendship. But the converse is also true, because I can say when a Sikh spoke to me about her faith, a Muslim about his and so on. There awaits a whole theological exploration of how Jesus (or Muhammad, or the Buddha) is to be spoken of in pluralist settings in which the main factor is friendship. Here is another category to be explored in our search for an adequate theology of pluralism. John Macmurray wrote in another work (*The Self as Agent*) that 'All meaningful knowledge is in order to action, and all meaningful action is order to friendship'.

These then are some clues as to a religious future in which Christians wholeheartedly embrace the notion of religious plurality, not only as 'within the gracious purposes of God' but also with an eager expectation that through dynamic processes involved in living with religious plurality, all of us, of whatever faith, will discover God, the *telos* to which the whole process moves. For Christians it will mean perhaps a discovery or a re-discovery of the one who for us is both *protos* and *eschatos* whom we see as the greatest clue humanity has. But the end will be God who will be *theos panta en pasin*, every thing to everyone. This will be 'the meaning and end of religion'.

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# BEING A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AMONG OTHER BELIEVING COMMUNITIES

Theological and Pastoral Reflections and Questions

- Michael Amaladoss, S.J. -

## 1. The Living Context

When we think of dialogue between living faiths and ideologies, we normally tend to focus on these as systems of creed, cult and organization. A dialogue, however, takes place, not between systems, but between people. People are not living in isolation, but as a community among other communities. Hence the focus on the 'believing community' rather on 'faith' and 'ideology' is welcome.

Believing communities living together share a context that conditions their lives and relationships. Any reflection on actual inter-faith dialogue must take into account this context. The context, of course, differs from place to place and from situation to situation. However, one could point to a number of elements that affect any given situation, though in various ways. Becoming aware of them will prevent our reflection from being abstract. It is not my intention to enter into an elaborate presentation of these elements, but to provide a framework that could help analysis of particular situations.

Believing communities living together share a common socio-economic, political and also cultural context. They are engaged in collectively shaping a *community of communities*, governed by a common political order. They contribute to, participate in and live by a common economic system. They are animated by a common cultural ethos, sharing a world view, attitudes and value system, even if within this cultural community, they may belong to various sub-cultures, partly determined by their religion. Besides a certain national ethos, determined by history and geography, modernity and the mass media also contribute to common perspectives.

Within this community of communities there are various relationships of power: between the majority, who may also belong to a particular religion and the various minorities, whether ethnic and/or religious, between the nationals and the migrants, between the economic and political elite and the people. Such power relations inevitably affect relationships between believing communities, which could be dominating, submissive, fearful, reserved, etc.

### *Religion in Society*

Such power relationships also depend on the role of religion in society. This



might vary among different religious groups. Religions can be need-based: most popular religiosity tends to be that way. Religions can be other-worldly and alienating. They may promise the proverbial 'pie in the sky'. Religions can legitimate existing oppressive structures, whether of race or of caste or of economic, political or religious privilege. Religions can also be prophetic, challenging injustice and oppression in whatever form in the light of ultimate perspectives. The role of a particular religion in society need not be homogenous. All these variations mentioned above could exist within a single community of believers: Christianity could be need-based, other-worldly, legitimating or prophetic as lived by different believers or by the same people in different situations.

At a more structural level the place of religion in the social order varies from country to country. I can only offer here a brief typology, with examples that are merely indicative, since the actual situation may be as numerous as civil societies in the world. There may be 'secular' societies which seek to privatize religion and their attitude to religion may be neutral (e.g. France) or negative (e.g. China). There are confessional states like some Muslim countries. (e.g. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel) There are states that have a special relationship to the dominant or majority religion. (e.g. England, Italy, Thailand, Japan, etc.) Other states seek to separate 'church' and 'state', though they are positive to religion and effectively function with a sort of non-denominational 'civil religion'. (e.g. USA) Some countries seek to relate positively to all religions, not identifying the state with any one of them. (e.g. India, Indonesia) Such constitutional provisions represent ideals that may not correspond to actual practice. As a matter of fact Christianity is dominant in Europe and the USA, Hinduism in India and Islam in Indonesia. But both the actual practice and the legal framework condition relationships between believing communities and complicate the task of evolving a common civil order. Thus, countries where Islam is dominant seek to impose *shariat* on every one. India is operating with a variety of civil codes applicable to various religious communities and is finding it difficult to evolve a common civil code. Pro- and anti-abortion groups influence elections in the USA.

Some of these factors may lead, not only to difference, but even to conflict among communities of believers. These factors are non-religious, but still condition inter-religious-community relationships. It is therefore useful to keep the context in mind when we think of relationships between believing communities.

## 2. Experience and Implications of Pluralism

Dialogue between communities of believers can take place at various *levels*. People can live together in peace and friendship. This supposes that one moves beyond mere tolerance to the acceptance of the other as a neighbour. This involves respect for others as persons, even if one does not know much about their beliefs. The beliefs of others are not automatically ridiculed or hated just because they are different. Life together may lead some to

discover each other through conversation and/or study so that there is a growing mutual knowledge and appreciation. This supposes that we try to see the others as they see themselves. It involves not only knowledge, but also a certain empathy.

A closer knowledge of each other may lead to mutual challenge and prophecy. The ideal situation is not that we challenge the others, but that they, relating to us as different, feel that some of their perspectives, assumptions and practices are challenged. This can lead to an examination of their own tradition, its re-interpretation and consequent growth. This process is mutual, so that there is mutual enrichment. Such enrichment is not just a quantitative addition of new elements, but an organic growth facilitated by the other. Where religion is not merely alienating or legitimating, but prophetic with regard to society, communities of believers can collaborate in common action promoting freedom, justice and fellowship. People can agree upon common human and spiritual values, even if each community seeks justification for them in its own faith or ideology.

Such collaboration in common action is possible only in an atmosphere in which each community of faith is aware that religion does not exist for itself but for life and that every orthodoxy must lead to and be tested by orthopraxis. One can then envisage the possibility of convergence in orthopraxis, even though each one is finding inspiration and motivation in one's own orthodoxy.

### *The Limitations of Religion*

Dialogue and collaboration among communities of faith can also lead to the realization of the limitations of religion. As long as one knows only one's own religion one does not question its absolute character. When one encounters other believers, one learns to relativize, not one's religion, but many aspects and expressions of it. Such limitations can come from various sources. Every religion, though it claims a revelation or other primordial experience or insight, is lived by a human community in history. So its expressions and structures are conditioned by historical, cultural, socio-economical and political factors. If one is positive to the religious experience of others and believes in the oneness of the Ultimate, then religions may be seen as different manifestations of the same Ultimate, without necessarily considering these manifestations as identical, similar or equal. Such evaluations can only be offered *a posteriori*, after the experience of dialogue. Diversity can also come from human creativity, shown especially through symbol and ritual, particularly in festival. Finally religious expressions and structures are not immune to the impact of human fragility and sinfulness. An awareness of the limitations of one's own religion is an excellent preparation and disposition for dialogue.

Taking together the context and the experience of pluralism one can say that inter-religious dialogue must not be considered in itself only, but as an element, basic and central for the believers, in a network of various

relationships. It should not be isolated either in reflection or in praxis.

### 3. Theological Questions

After becoming aware of the context and experience of dialogue between communities of faith we can now go on to spell out some of the theological questions that we need to explore - that some have already started exploring. Limitations of space and time allow me only to indicate the directions which such exploration can take.

#### *A Theology of Religion*

We are accustomed to a philosophy of religion. I think we should also develop a theology of religion. Theological anthropology deals with human persons. A theology of religion will reflect theologically on the phenomenon and experience of religion. In the absence of such a theology we seem to operate with the help of the history of religions. Religion is then seen 'objectively' as a system constituted by a creed (myths), rituals and an organization (priesthood). By contrast, in a theology religion would be seen as facilitating an encounter of the human with the Ultimate in community. The important thing is the encounter. This encounter is also in some way related to the community. It leads to and derives from a narration of previous encounters expressed in myth and symbol through a tradition. Otherwise it will simply be an idiosyncratic experience. Religion is not a mediation, but only a facilitation, so that it does not come in between the person and the Ultimate.

The encounter is with the Absolute, but the symbols through which the encounter takes place remain relative. The Absolute can be encountered only in the relative. But to absolutize the relative is to miss the real Absolute. Religion is not some 'thing'. It is a symbolic system. When this is absolutized it can become oppressive or legitimate oppression. Secular critiques often attack the absolute pretensions of religion. But the best critique of religion is an authentic experience of the Absolute.

The fruit of the encounter is shown in praxis in view of building a new community - humanity. The reality of salvation or liberation is concretely seen in doing justice and promoting fellowship. Various religions may symbolize this in various ways. We call it the Reign of God. It is seen as a realization in the future, prepared in history, but transcending history/time. The goal is eschatological. This emphasizes both the importance of history as well as the need to transcend it.

I think the tendency of Christianity is to absolutize itself, though one speaks of being 'a pilgrim Church'! It is important to realize that we are relativizing religion - Christianity - not in relation to other religions, but in relation to the Absolute. We are relativizing, not Reality or Truth, but its expression in symbol and structure.

## *A Theology of Religions*

The theology of religions is a very vast and thriving field today. Here, I am only pointing to some new accents in it. The new element in the theology of religions is the growing positive appreciation of other religions as facilitators of human-Ultimate encounter. This appreciation arises out of the meeting with other believers in whom one discerns the fruits of such human-Ultimate encounter. This experience has given rise to the realization that the plan of God embraces the whole universe and all peoples. (I speak of God, rather than the Ultimate, here because I am talking in a Christian theological context.) God's saving self-communication starts with creation and continues in and through history. It takes a particular redemptive form in Jesus Christ, because of human freedom and sin. God continues to manifest God's self in the lives of people. To speak of a diversity in the manifestations of God does not imply that all of them are the same or are equal. But it does imply that if they are manifestations of one God they must be linked to each other in some way, that they must all together constitute a structure, that the pluralism appears as a network of dynamic unity. While we affirm this *a priori* because we believe that there is only one God, the concrete historical form of such a structure can be discovered, and perhaps even constructed, only through dialogue between the community of believers. Each manifestation will have its special role in history. Christians affirm that God's manifestation in Jesus is central. But this centrality has to be lived and experienced in history and its specificity has to be discovered in the praxis of dialogue. Theologians in Asia are developing a theology of harmony to embrace the dynamic unity of the different manifestations of God in history.

## *A Theology of History*

We are accustomed to view the history of salvation as a linear process, starting with creation, proceeding to the election of Abraham and the covenant with Israel and climaxing in the new covenant in Jesus Christ and moving on to his second coming. Looking at history from this perspective we used to reduce other religions to a cosmic covenant linked to creation and declare them illegitimate after the final revelation in Jesus Christ. While this clear line of history accounts for the story of the Bible, it does not take into account the different stories in which other people narrate their own experiences of God. If these stories are taken seriously, then the pattern of history will become a very complex one.

Though we often repeat that we are living in an eschatological period of 'already - not yet', one often gets the impression that the 'already' pole is more stressed than the 'not yet' one. The fulfilment of history is in the future, not in the past, even if the period of fulfilment has started. We are living in a time of active hope. This is a time of creativity, not only for the Spirit of God, but also for us, because the Reign of God is both God's gift and our task. This equilibrium between the mystery of God's action and the history of human creative involvement will provide the required space for

dialogue and collaboration among communities of faith, while being open to the future without pre-judging the outcome in the light of our own narrow reading of history.

### *A Christology, Set in the Theology of the Triune God*

The role of Christ in the history of salvation is a hot topic today. I think that in order to advance the discussion we have to question some of the presuppositions on which it is now based. There is such an identification of Christ with Christianity that one easily introduces a division of labour within the Trinity, attributing to the Spirit the action of God among other communities of faith. I think that this is an unacceptable division of the Trinity. Besides it does not solve any question when it is said that the Spirit active in the others is the Spirit of Christ. The distinction, not separation, between the historical Jesus and mystic Christ proposed by some theologians, particularly in Asia, is worth exploring. One must however avoid confounding this distinction with the other one between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The first distinction speaks of the mystic Christ, active in and beyond history, who takes human and therefore limited form in Jesus (Phil 2:6-7), whereas the second distinction speaks of the Jesus of history who becomes Christ in the faith of the believers. These are contrary movements.

We also need to look into the traditional theories of redemption. The New Testament explains the mystery of redemption through categories familiar to Jewish culture. These cultural explanations are not normative. Scholastic theologians use the Aristotelian system of causes developed with reference to the material world: efficient, final, formal and material. Today we must look for other explanations that take personal relationships as the model. In Asia there is also an effort to move beyond concepts to symbols. Concepts are important, but they are univocal, abstract and poor in content. Symbols are primary and they are rich and evocative and give rise to interpretative reflection in the context of the varying experiences of life. For instance, while we respond readily to symbols like Lord and victim, the Hindus are more responsive to symbols like the suffering servant, guru and mother. If our images of Christ change, our Christological questions too will change.

### *A New Ecclesiology*

In the field of ecclesiology, two questions seem important: the role and the specificity of the Church. If no one subscribes any more to the traditional adage: "There is no salvation outside the Church" and if there is a positive appreciation for the role of other religions in God's self-communication to people, what then is the role of the Church. There is an effort to identify the role of the Church as a sacrament - symbol and servant - of the Reign of God. Baptism then will become, not a passport to salvation, but a call to mission at the service of the Reign of God.

Correspondingly the specificity of the Church will consist, not in being the exclusive way of God's self-communication, but a particular way, whatever be its special role in history. One way of discovering the specificity is *a priori*, that is, looking at the Gospel: the Reign of God as a new human community of freedom, fellowship and justice; the new commandment of love; the way of Christ in opting for the poor in self-giving and service, even unto death. Another way is *a posteriori* through the praxis of dialogue.

A new ecclesiology will also mean a new theology of mission. The whole Christian community can be seen as a community on mission. The focus of this mission will be building up of the Reign of God and of the Church at its service. Setting the mission of the Church in the broader context of the mission of God through Christ and the Spirit, we can afford to proclaim Jesus and the Reign of God without anxiety and aggressivity. Otherwise mission without mystery can be oppressive.

### *The Problem of Criteria*

One of the questions that comes up often in the context of inter-religious dialogue is that of criteria. When we have to discern and to collaborate what are the criteria that should help us? Looking from the Christian point of view, people have proposed the values of the Reign of God like freedom, fellowship, love and justice or the gifts of the Spirit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Gal. 5:22-23) Trying to get out of an exclusively Christian perspective and to adopt a secular one, people have spoken of the *humanum* or the fullness of life for the community. I would suggest that such criteria must emerge out of dialogue among people of good will, whatever be their faith convictions. Experience shows that this is possible, if people are not misguided by fundamentalism and narrow loyalties.

### *A Theology of Conflict*

Conflicts can arise between communities of believers due to various reasons. Human limitation and sinfulness are personal factors. Religion can be used to legitimate or support conflicts that are basically non-religious and belong rather to the economic, political and social spheres. Conflicts can also have religious causes when the other is seen as an 'infidel' or 'heretic', so that an element of moral guilt is attached to religious difference. Finally conflicts can arise in the process of convincing the other of what one perceives to be right in the sphere of truth and moral behaviour. Where there are real differences one cannot avoid some conflict. Hence the need to discern between avoidable and unavoidable conflicts, constructive and destructive conflicts, violent and non-violent conflicts.

At the strictly religious level one should purify oneself and one's religious orientations, so that it is not manipulated by non-religious factors. This does not mean that one cannot struggle against unjust economic, political or social structures. But one should make every effort to keep them at a

human, 'secular' level, without mixing religion into it, even if one draws inspiration from one's own religion. Here is a thin line that is very easily crossed. However where there are just struggles in the secular sphere, religions cannot be passive. Authentic religion must get involved in promoting peace *and* justice. It can do this effectively only in so far as it stands apart as a moral, prophetic voice.

Mutual prophecy at the strictly religious level can also involve conflict. Thus one could challenge the religious legitimacy of caste, race, etc. But such conflict, in order to be creative and constructive, must be non-violent and lead to a conversation and mutual conversion. This can happen only when every community of believers has created a necessary space for welcoming the other as other, in the context of a global world view that recognizes, integrates and transcends religious pluralism.

Pluralism in community cannot but be conflictual. If this is not recognized and faced, dialogue can become superficial and artificial, focusing on the least common denominator and promoting an unauthentic peace. True community requires us to face and to overcome conflict in our growth towards community.

#### **4. Pastoral Questions**

It is not my intention to be exhaustive in raising pastoral questions in the context of dialogue between communities of faith, but to point to some areas seen as problematic in the light of my experience in India.

##### *Inculturation*

When Christianity is not really inculturated in a particular culture, the Christian community remains 'foreign' culturally and consequently also socially and politically. There is always a tendency to identify culture with religion, especially that of the majority. A community whose faith has had its origin abroad and has not taken local roots becomes a minority group religiously and otherwise. Such cultural alienation may be further strengthened by financial and organizational dependence. Inter-religious dialogue can still be useful, but then takes the form of contact between a local and a foreign religion. The Christian community is not really rooted in and relevant to the local culture. The community it shares with other faith groups is not really deep. It may also be busy defending its political and social rights as a minority community. In a conflictual, perhaps discriminatory or even oppressive situation, it might even feel that its 'foreignness' is an asset rather than a liability, helping greater group differentiation and cohesion. Both majorities and minorities can be religiously fundamentalistic for different, but analogous, reasons. I need not give examples. Fundamentalism or a sense of marginalization and oppression is not the ideal climate for dialogue.

On the other hand, majority religious groups seem happy to keep minority

religious groups as 'foreign'. Inculturation of a religious minority introduces an element of pluralism into the cultural group and is therefore seen as threatening the unity of the majority national or ethnic community.

We have a complex problem here. We cannot remain 'foreign' if we wish to be relevant. At the same time, only through dialogue can we convince the other believers that, on the one hand, through our efforts at inculturation, we are not really threatening social, political and cultural unity and, on the other, we have really something new and different to contribute from our religious resources to the common good. The pastoral problem here is that we cannot simply promote inter-religious dialogue without taking into account these concrete social and political problems. This is as true of Christian minority groups in the Middle East or Asia as of Muslim or Hindu minority groups in Europe or America.

### *Dialogue and Popular Religion*

Inter-religious dialogue often tends to be the activity of the elite. While this is necessary, this should arise out of an ongoing dialogue of life and of sharing experience among the people. Popular religiosity in all religions seems to be easily dismissed as superstitious, syncretistic or sectarian. But, where the elite hesitate and procrastinate, the people have their own ways of spontaneously inculturating their faith in their living culture. People at a popular religious level also seem to have less inhibitions in sharing experience with other believers. I wonder sometimes whether we need to promote dialogue between the elite and the people within the same religious tradition.

Trying to dialogue at popular levels we would discover new ways of dialoguing. People respond to symbols more than to concepts. Collaboration in action may be more important to them than theological or spiritual conversation. They may also be more attracted to participation in celebration.

### *Sharing Religious Experience*

Sharing religious experience is an integral element of dialogue among communities of faith. Once the people realize the fundamental oneness of the Ultimate they all relate to, they tend to value positively the symbols that help the others to relate to the Ultimate. It is in this context that we must appreciate the efforts of Christian communities in countries like India who have explored the possibilities of listening to each other's Scriptures, of praying together, of celebrating some cosmic social festivals, like the harvest festival, for example, together. Over the last twenty years, theologians in India have discussed themes like the inspiration of other religious Scriptures, revelation, sharing worship with believers of other religions, popular religion, etc. Listening together to the Scriptures of various religions is a different experience from reading and interpreting the Scriptures of other believers from one's own perspective. Mahatma Gandhi was a pioneer in this. He



conducted inter-religious prayer meetings to promote the cause of peace among religions. Scriptures and hymns from different religions were used in these meetings. He was shot on his way to one such meeting in Delhi.

### *Formation*

It is in and through dialogue with other believers that one learns to appreciate them and their religions. One could say that it is in the context of common action for liberation that one appreciates the value and purpose of dialogue. It is in dialoguing that one learns to dialogue. Such inter-religious experiences should be prepared for before and reflected upon afterwards if they have to become occasions and means of learning and formation.

## **5. Approaches and Methodologies**

The way we approach the believers of other faith communities determine our attitudes in and experience of dialogue. People who approach other religions from an *a priori* perspective tend to be exclusive or inclusive according to their starting point and orientation. One could point to, in an indicative manner, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner. Others who take an *a posteriori* approach tend to be pluralist, in a 'history of religions' perspective. Most believers adopt a dialogical perspective that combines the *a priori* and *a posteriori* approaches. They usually tend to an inclusivism that is open to pluralism. They do not claim to develop a universal point of view. They are rooted in their own faith experience. But they are able to 'pass over' to the other's faith experience sympathetically and come back to their own. This is true, not only of Christian believers, but also of others who are engaged in dialogue. What I have offered here is a typology for purposes of illustration. One could identify different approaches within each of the three broad perspectives I have evoked above.

Another methodological point would be that we need to move from a conceptual-deductive mode to a symbolic-interpretative mode of thinking. This is not the occasion to develop an alternative theory of knowledge. I shall be satisfied with a brief indication. The deductive method is controlled by the principle of contradiction. One speaks of the either/or approach to *objects*. A symbol can have multiple meanings. One speaks of a both/and approach to *experiences*. Let us take for example the question of identity. One can see oneself as not the other. One can also explore oneself, not only without needing to deny any one else, but also discovering oneself in a network of relationships with others. An either/or approach has to be either exclusivistic or pluralistic. A both/and approach will be inclusive, open and related, but without domination.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding these exploratory reflections and questions on inter-religious dialogue, I would like to suggest for our contemplation and reflection an

image of *dialogue as a common pilgrimage*. As the Second Vatican Council declared, all peoples share a common origin and a common goal. It is in this horizon that dialogue becomes meaningful. All sincere believers are walking towards the Ultimate. In this process we discover each other as companions and share our experiences. We learn from each other. Our paths may cross or merge or converge. But what is important is that we keep moving on towards our common goal guided by our memories and hopes, encouraged by our fellowship, facing and overcoming obstacles and animated by the Spirit.

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**DRUMVERSATION by Ravi-Ji, a Hindu social activist and poet from Trinidad and Tobago**

i heard  
coming from afar;  
just next door -  
a rhythm enchanting,  
pulsating and virile.

it lasted years  
just next door;  
but i never knew the drummer -  
for i was afraid.

then i saw him  
walking on the dirt trace,  
barefooted like myself.  
i recognised him by the same rhythm  
moving his feet.

i called him brother,  
he replied brother.  
knowing him  
i feared no more  
exchanging greetings  
i feared no more.

the rhythm  
was no more threatening,  
sometimes strange  
sometimes aggressive  
sometimes mournful  
sometimes celebrative  
sometimes complaining  
sometimes...even familiar.

why do you beat upon your drum  
so long? so loud? i asked.  
come and see  
that you may understand,

he smiled challengingly.

i went one day  
as he sat upon an old log, worn smooth  
from generations of drummers.

And as he started  
his rhythm,  
a soulful incantation  
filled the air and  
chains were breaking  
slipping, falling  
prostrating to the strong rhythm.

Chains from his feet  
chains for his hands  
chains from his mind  
chains from his eyes  
chains from his loins  
chains from his tongue.

somewhere in the distance  
really ... just next door -  
in my own back yard  
the tassa was warming up.

two drums in the neighbourhood  
two languages, one meaning  
two moods, one aspiration  
two histories, one destiny  
two pains, one desperation  
two faces, one resolve  
the drummers are sweating  
the skins are hot, the hands untired

do you hear ... do you hear...  
do you hear the drumversation...

# UNDERSTANDING AND WITNESSING TO CHRIST IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD

- Jane Smith -

What I have tried to do in this fairly brief presentation is to set out, what seemed to me, to be a range of positions trying to avoid, not always successfully, the terms exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist. I have the following six major positions and I hope that we can engage in some conversation about them.

- 1) **Salvation is only through God's grace specifically as revealed in Jesus Christ. Only those who have faith in Christ will be saved.**

Hendrik Kraemer. We must take seriously such verses as John 14:6 "No one comes to the Father but by me" and Acts 4:12 "There is no other name under heaven ... by which we must be saved." Nowhere else is there salvation. The gospel demands that Christ be preached to all nations and that he must be accepted for salvation.

Karl Barth. Christianity itself is no better than any other religion - it is Christ that matters. Revelation and salvation are available only in Jesus Christ, the true Word of God as an historical event.

Evangelicals. Jesus represents a *unique* event in human history. This is often called the "scandal of particularity" - that in the Christ-event God has offered a way to salvation which really is not found anywhere else.

History of religions reflections.

i) As a student of Wilfred Smith, I cannot help but quote him: "A claim to uniqueness is not unique", that in fact in many of the religions of the world one finds a similar kind of claim to uniqueness.

ii) Diana Eck (*Encountering God*): On the "no other name" issue she quotes Kristen Stendahl as remarking that phrases such as this "grow legs and walk around out of context." 13th century Japan - pure land teacher Nichiren insisted that only the name of the Lotus Sutra was salvific.

iii) Sri Aurobindo: "... among all the divisions of mankind it is to India that is reserved the highest and the most splendid destiny, the most essential to the future of the human race ..."

- 2) **Salvation is available to non-Christians but it is mediated through their own religions by the grace of God through Christ. All persons can achieve salvation, no matter what their religion, but it is Christ who does the saving.**

Karl Rahner. "Anonymous Christians", one who is not Christian but who is saved by the grace of Jesus Christ *mediated through* his or her own religion. God operates in other religions but is revealed definitively in Christ. Thus the life and death of Jesus is not just an illustration of our salvation but is actual cause of everyone's salvation. This has been a very important position for Roman Catholics in relation to a theology of religions. It is clearly an attempt to move beyond Christian exclusivism. (Paul Knitter in *No other Name* quotes Pope John Paul II in relation to this as saying: "All people have been redeemed by Christ even though they may not know it.")

Hans Küng. He follows generally in this mould but seems to move beyond Rahner by recognizing that there is salvation in other religions themselves, but he still insists that to be Christian means that one proclaims Christ to be normative not only for Christians but for all people. He is clearly trying to get past exclusivism (which he calls a religious embarrassment) and he does so by emphasizing theocentrism. I have had the opportunity to interact with Küng several times on themes related to the relationship between Islam and Christianity and I would like to mention one quote from him which does seem to embody his general position: "Muhammed could provide for us Christians, not the decisive, guiding norm that Jesus gives us, but a *prophetic corrective* in the name of the one and same God ...".

Another version of this general position though distinct from Rahner is that of:

Gavin D'Costa. I quote from *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*: "... whenever and wherever God reveals herself, in a manner often unrecognized or misrepresented by Christians, this is the God who is disclosed in Christ. Christians therefore need to learn more deeply about God from God's self-revelation wherever it has occurred." But, he says that "it is impossible to harmonize truth claims if they are in basic contradiction to God's revelation in Christ. When one reflects on the insights of other religions about God, humanity or the world the implicit or explicit criterion is the *normativeness* of Christ. In so far as God's spirit is present in other religions, that spirit is the presence of Christ. God's salvific will is universal, but salvation is through God in Christ alone.

Most mainline Protestants probably hold to some version of this position. They don't agree that there is no salvation possible in other religions, but in general they do agree with the Reformation position that salvation is through Christ alone, "by faith in Christ". This is generally within the scope of both Tillich and Panneberg's position: Christianity is not better than other religions (amazing how many make that point that religion itself is not something that we need to value so greatly), but the revelation of Jesus the

Christ is superior to other revelations as the concrete symbol of God's final revelation at the end of time.

**3) Christ is unique, Christianity is unique, and all other religions are unique. But the divine reality is incarnate foremost in Christ.**

John Cobb. He is the only one I put under this heading which is not to say that he is the only who would hold to it. It is just that I found it difficult to read Cobb and to put into any of the other positions, so I gave him a position of his own. In *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (1975) he talks about Christ as the image of creative transformation, the one who responds to changing human needs without himself changing. He encourages openness to other religions (he has been in the forefront of that movement) and says that Christ is the *unity* of all the different ways. In *Beyond Dialogue* (1982) he again stresses the openness to the possibility of truth wherever it can be found, but also witness to the truth as we have encountered it in our own Christian history. He says "That is evangelism, the announcement as we understand it of the gospel of Jesus Christ...". In 1992 he was writing for D'Costa's *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* and arguing for a radical pluralism in affirming the uniqueness of Christianity *and* of other religions. But he says that the best reason for openness to others is Christo-centrism. It is with Jesus Christ as the centre that Christianity can be opened to transforming through what it learns from others, and that in that way it can develop a truly global theology.

Cobb writes in *Beyond Pluralism* "In Christ we find both a holiness that must burn up all that is unholy, and a tender mercy and compassion which goes to the uttermost limit to receive the unholy. No human mind can grasp the depth of that mystery. But, having been laid hold by it, no human being can think of it as merely one among many symbols of an unknowable reality. To affirm that this is truth, not merely truth for me but truth for all, is not arrogance. It is simply responsible human behaviour".

**4) Christ is *our* means of salvation, and he is sufficient for that, but he is not the only means.**

John Hick. He is one of the most articulate exponents of what he calls the destructiveness of Christian superiority. He says that Christianity is only one of the forms of religious life through which Christians can be "savingly related to God". He is famous for what is now called "the Copernican revolution in theology" which would refer to the distinction that he draws between mythical and literal interpretations of the incarnation. He makes that distinction so as to avoid saying that the incarnation itself was unique or the only way in which God was revealed. In *God Has Many Names* (1982) Hick says that the notion that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God has been attacked on academic grounds and that the great Christological sayings such as "I and the Father are one", "No one comes to the Father but by me" were, he says, probably never really spoken by Jesus. Thus the statement that Jesus was God incarnate is not factual. It should be

interpreted as mythological (obviously in the full rich sense of what that means, not as meaning a kind of idle story). He says "Whenever in the history of Christian thought theologians have tried to spell out its meaning in literal, factual terms the result has been heretical... Indeed one may say that the *fundamental heresy* is *precisely* to treat the incarnation as a factual hypothesis... It is a mythological idea, a figure of speech, a piece of poetic imagery. It is a way of saying the Jesus is *our* living contact with the transcendent God...". Therefore, while we can revere Christ as the one through whom we have found salvation (it is interesting that he puts *we*, the agent becomes *we*) we don't have to draw the negative conclusion that Christ is the *only* point of contact with God or the only way to salvation. (Note: Knitter in *No Other Name* cites Monika Hellwig as an example of another theologian who uses Hick's perspective as a means of working for interreligious dialogue based on a non-normative Christology.)

Gordon Kaufman. He is in general agreement with Hick and also with Wilfred Cantwell Smith that to talk about the *absoluteness* and the exclusivity of Christianity really is to border on idolatry. He calls for a Christian theological self-understanding informed by modern historical consciousness. (He is very keen on having us understand that we all occupy a place in history. Things have come before us, things will come after and what we say is by definition relative to that point in history). He says that while absoluteness may be weakened, our religious convictions need not be. Christian faith will be seen as one perspective among many, with the historical figure of Jesus Christ giving historical concreteness to the understanding of both God and humanity. It is not necessary to give up Christ as long as we acknowledge that our claims are simply *ours* (and not those that should be the claims of everyone).

Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Christ was a mediator but not the only one - he cites Krishna, the Qur'an, etc. He says some Christians have insisted that Christ is the only one, others that there have been other forms yet Christ is categorically different from them. Smith argues that the important issue is not how one perceives Christ and conceptualizes that, but how one perceives and characterizes God's *other* activities over history in relation to the act in Christ.

Tom Driver. In *Christ in a Changing World* (1981) Driver makes a rather extreme statement: "... to regard the incarnation of infinite God in finite Jesus as paradoxical, unprecedented and final ... results in evil. It leads to the degradation of other religions and indeed of all experience that is not identifiably 'Christian'." He, as many others now are doing, identifies the belief that Christ is the ultimate, the final, the once for all, the one for everyone, actually has led to extreme forms of cultural imperialism. He says that the more we make absolute claims about Christ the more we are in danger actually of losing Christ because we are getting out of touch with the real meaning. He also makes the interesting observation that to really look at Christ, one way to understand how to decentralize or de-absolutize the figure of Christ, is to see that he (Christ) refers to many Christs, to individual

within specific communities. That is a theme that is picked up by some of the feminist theologians. Driver has commented that he feels his position is probably so extreme that he is out there all by himself (I am not sure whether that is true or not).

I would now like to shift from this range of possibilities and move on to looking at some of the more recent theologies and their positions on Christ which I think can come under the general rubric of "Liberation Theology". As a way of doing that I would like to look at some of the Asian theologies which seem to me to provide a kind of transition between what may be a more intellectualized way (Cobb notwithstanding), and those who are writing from within the pain of the deep suffering and alienation of their own communities. It is a rather lengthy summary of what I see their positions to be:

- 5) **Jesus Christ as the medium of salvation is normative for Christians but not for everyone. To affirm one particularity is not to deny others. The presence of Christ goes beyond the figure of Jesus in such a way that the notion of a universal norm gives way to a relational theology. It is more important to live in commitment to Christ than to make theological claims.**

Stanley Samartha says that "there seems to be an excess of Christological confidence over theological common sense...". He argues for a theocentrism over christocentrism and says that we live in a pluralistic world and that really means that no single vision of truth has the right to claim finality. On the other hand he really disavows what he calls a shallow, uncritical relativism, "a soup in which all pieces of toast eventually become soggy". Echoing some of Driver, he says that exclusivism leads to theological injustice, and in fact underestimates the real humanity of Jesus. This *humanity* is needed to support struggles for human freedom, dignity and self-respect. The living presence of the risen Christ both includes Jesus and goes beyond Jesus (this is also true in some feminist thought), thus beyond the boundaries of the visible church. On the issue of particularity in relation to Christ he says that there is a third alternative to the two commonly held options of (1) the conquest by Jesus Christ of any other possible lords, or (2) that all particularities are valid; and that is to avoid making theological declarations and live in obedience to Christ, so that the kind of life one lives becomes the declaration of what one thinks about Jesus. He says that Christians are called upon to witness the good news of Jesus' resurrection, but - a witness is not a judgement.

Wesley Ariarajah. He argues that there is no reason why one should not make a specific and sincere truth-claim, faith-claim such as "Christ is the only way, the only saviour," as long as one does not do it in such a way that it denies the faith-claim of anyone else. And, ultimately, like many others, he says that it is much better to make commitments on how to live than to make claims.

Raymundo Panikkar. He rejects the idea that there is anyone that different people call by many different names. He talks about the christic principle which is neither a particular event nor a universal religion. The saving power to which Christians give the name of Christ is neither one nor many, but it is a kind of christic universal vision. "The primary reason the historical Jesus saves is that he embodies a reality, the Christ, which is beyond every historical form".

Aloysius Pieris. He calls the obsession of Christian theologians with the idea of the uniqueness of Christ a *false start*. If this uniqueness is implied in terms like Christ, and son of God, that uniqueness is claimed by a number or other religious figures. The issue is not whether Jesus was unique, but Gautama was unique and others were also unique, but was he the exclusive medium of salvation for everyone? And that really is the issue that we are talking about here: was Jesus, is Jesus the exclusive medium of salvation for all. He says "What mediates liberation is the medium to which one culture, as much as another, can decide what name to give: Christ, Son of God, Dharma ... each according to its own religious idiom. What really informs a christology is the transforming *praxis*, the praxis that proves in the story of Jesus and that continues in his followers, the medium of salvation is operative, but it is not the total mystery of salvation...".

Choan-Seng Song. In *Third Eye Theology* he is very explicit in urging Christians to see Christ through the eyes of persons of all colours and cultures. He leads us directly to the liberation things and insists that Jesus Christ, is the ultimate expression of God's pain-love. He makes this statement of politics "In Jesus Christ we encounter the political God as the messianic politician".

6. **Jesus Christ is *not* an expression of western white male supremacy. He is the symbol of the overcoming of poverty and oppression, the victor over suffering, the one who brings freedom and ultimate justice.**

There is much less explicit attention paid to what I would say categorizes these several liberation theologies to the implications of this kind of theology for persons of other religious traditions and other faiths. I think we need to bring out in our conversation what are the implicit messages in these kinds of expressions of what I would call liberation theology. Technically they should not all be called "liberation", but it certainly does seem to me that they are all struggling to be free from one or another kind of oppression I have chosen to identify four out of a range of possibilities, specifically Latin American, Palestinian, black and feminist. Some of the ways in which this attempt to understand Jesus Christ, or Jesus or Christ as a way of basically opposing imperialism, are spelled out.

A) Jesus the Christ is the one who was poor, is the liberator, is he who through his death and resurrection ushers in a kingdom of justice.



i) Jon Sobrino and Leonardo Boff. The response to Jesus is not so much a thought process as a response to a life situation. One can't know who Jesus is until one follows him and puts his teachings into practice in one's own life. Sobrino says "The real universality of Jesus shows up only in its concrete embodiment". He says there are two reasons for an emphasis on the historical Jesus: (1) The situation in Latin America has some real parallels with the situation of the time of Christ in terms of poverty and exploitation. (2) The early testimonies to who Jesus was were not based on well developed theologies, they were based on the experience of having *seen* Jesus. The people in Latin America in their very lives, their circumstances and their situations see Jesus and know who Jesus is and it is an immediate living testimony. "Reflection on Christ takes place in a socio-historical context characterized by domination and repression with the result that Christology is one of Jesus as a liberator".

ii) Gustavo Gutierrez talks about a radical - thus a political - liberation. He talks about the historical, political, liberating and thus salvific event occurring through a process that reaches its fulfilment in Christ. "The liberation which Jesus offers is universal and integral - it transcends national boundaries, attacks the foundation of injustice and exploitation, and eliminates politico-religious confusions...". And in an article called *The Voice of the Poor in the Church* he says that if we are not able to speak about the real deaths of our people today, we will not be able to speak about the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We find that very much echoed in Palestinian writing.

I would just like to read a brief passage from the Guatemalan exiled writer Julia Esquivel who is writing out of her deep, personal experience with Jesus Christ "The word, for our sake became poverty clothed as the poor who live off the refuse heap... became agony in the shrunken breast of the woman grown old by the absence of her murdered husband... became a sob a thousand times stifled in the immovable mouth of the child who died from hunger... The word became a path in the jungle, a decision on a farm, love in women, unity among workers, and a star for those few who can inspire dreams... The word became the seed of justice and we conceived peace". This is contextual theology.

B) Jesus Christ is the one who justifies our anguish because he suffered as we suffer. The effort here is to compare the suffering of Jesus with the suffering of the Palestinian people, to question why it is that Jesus suffered on that particular piece of land, died, rose again and yet the Palestinian people are still suffering. What is the reason for that suffering? The answer they come up with is that somehow there is a redemptive nature to the quality of their very suffering, the same way that there has been a redemptive feature to the quality of Christ, an identification with the suffering of people with the suffering of Christ, but the positive conclusion to all of this. Looking specifically at the issue of the land, they are saying that the idea of the kingdom ushered in by the presence, reality and resurrection of Christ means that the land is no longer important as the

Temple which was destroyed, and the person of Jesus took over that function, so the fact that they don't, any more, have their land cannot be as important as the kind of redemptive process that they are experiencing through the very fact of their own suffering.

C) Jesus Christ is black - that is to say, he is not, and was not, white.

i) James Cone. He has been writing for a number of years now that "Jesus Christ is the content of the hopes and dreams of black people... the foundation of (the) struggle for freedom." He says that Jesus really represents the truth that is contained in the history of the oppression of all peoples of colour. Therefore he is not an abstract theological concept, but an "event of liberation". All knowledge of Jesus is in the history and culture of the oppressed - that is what is meant by saying that Jesus is black. Thus his blackness is both literal (he was a Jew) and symbolic (Black also means red, brown, yellow, everything else but white.)

ii) Theo Witvliet. In *The Way of the Black Messiah*, raises the question that also feminists raise "can you have a Black theology that is really true to the suffering and oppression of Black people and see Jesus as a liberation from this and still call it Christian?" What does this have to do with the way other Christians are developing their theology. He links the idea of the liberating praxis of Jesus with the pneumatology - understanding the healing power of the spirit of Jesus working through the slaves and persecuted blacks.

iii) South African black theology - in the late 1960s and early 1970 they used the philosophy of the new black consciousness to target the Christian church. Tutu and Mbiti charges that the church has been silent about repression. Simon Maimela specified that while the death and resurrection of Jesus do offer a way of remedying the polarization between the oppressor and the oppressed, between white and black, we must recognize that the Christ-event is not separable from the renewal of political, economic and social institutions. "The gift which Christ offers to the world is the hope for a radical liberation!" says Maimela.

D. Jesus Christ was not just a male, he was a HUMAN. His maleness is superseded by his Christness.

This is the feminist position. So much of feminist theology has been an attempt to see what is recoverable in Christian history about a testimony to the presence of Christ given the fact that Christ was male and somehow, whether there is a connection or not, so much of Christian history has been dominated by women being excluded from the theological scene which has been taken over by males. "If Christ is a saviour of all, i.e. all humanity, then it is the humanity of Christ, not Christ's maleness, Christ's humanity that is significant" according to Jacqueline Grant (African/American feminist theologian). Elizabeth Fiorenza questions how being a woman and being a Christian can be understood as not contradictory and exclusive of each other

(cf. Witvliet). Referring to Cone's black Christ she says she is hesitant to postulate a feminine Christ as the canonical norm. Still, she asks, how can a male Christ be a role model for all Christians? Rita Brock provides one answer when she develops a Christology that is centred in healing community. She calls this Crista/Community, in which Jesus participates as a kind of co-creator but does not control. Feminist theology, Brock says, should focus on Christ but not make him the exclusive revelation of the God/dess. She echoes Driver in saying that Christ refers to the many Christs who form our specific communities. Rosemary Ruether says, like others have said, that Euro-American theologies have really not acknowledged the systematic oppression experienced by blacks, women and other marginalized groups, and that the eschatological reality of a global consciousness of interdependent humanity is present even now in what is called "the cross-resurrection of the event of renewed promise, true word and decisive manifestation named Jesus Christ". In *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* she cast her feminist lot with thinkers such as Hick, Kaufman and W.C. Smith in arguing for a pluralist understanding of truth: "The idea that Christianity, or even the biblical faiths, have a monopoly on religious truth is an outrageous and absurd religious chauvinism. It is astonishing that even Christian liberals and radicals fail to seriously question this assumption. My own assumption is that the Divine Being that generates, uphold and renews the world is truly universal, and is the father and mother of all peoples without discrimination. This means that true revelation and true relationship to the divine is to be found in all religions."

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**Prof. Jane Smith, an historian of religions, is Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs, Iliff School of Theology, Denver, Colorado.**

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**Konrad Raiser**

**Ecumenism in Transition**

A thought-provoking analysis of the current ecumenical situation by Konrad Raiser, newly elected WCC general secretary. In the face of the challenges posed by religious pluralism, the "global system", threats to the very survival of the planet and diversity in the church, the author proposes "a new paradigm for ecumenism" in the image of the *oikoumene* as "the one household of life".

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Konrad-Raiser

**Ecumenism  
in  
Transition**



A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement!

- H.B. Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana -

(His Beatitude, Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana and all Albania was originally not scheduled to make a presentation. However, once the meeting began the organizers of the consultation requested him, if possible, to speak on the theme "Understanding and witnessing to Christ in a pluralistic world" from an Orthodox perspective. Archbishop Anastasios graciously accepted to express his ideas in the form of a meditation.)

Among the crucial issues that we have faced during the past decades, and that we shall continue to face, I believe, in our Christian witness during the last part of this century, the problem of how we understand the Christian witness and, especially in this frame of dialogue, remains always present.

### Fundamental theological convictions

(1) The first question that deals with the frame of this adventure of dialogue, is how can we Christians, while remaining faithful to our Christian principles and love for Christ, encounter and understand theologically the other religions? This burning question - for all present in this room - has been for many years not only an intellectual problem, but also an existential challenge, sometimes very painful.

Living in an Orthodox context, I have tried to find some guidance in the patristic thought of the undivided church, which was also developed in a pluralistic society with a lot of challenges. From this vast theological treasure I shall select as an introduction to our discussion only a few theological attitudes. The first is well known and comes from Justin the Martyr. I repeat only as he said that whatever good has been found and expressed by philosophers and law-givers was sought and obtained in virtue of their sharing the Logos. All laws know the main conception about *Logos spermatikos* formulated by Justin so near to the New Testament, following the way opened by St. John the evangelist, in his preamble about Christ, the Logos. But very soon I noticed that Justin concluded this brief reference to the *spermatikos Logos* with a basic principle which, strangely enough, has not been stressed by those referring to his position. He emphasizes the difference between seeds (*sperma*) and the realization of the fullness of life inherent in it. And he also differentiates between inherent force (*dynamis*) and grace (*charis*). I read the passage: "because a seed of something, a type given according to the inherent force, is not same with this through the grace of which the transformation and coping of it is realized". And we know that finally Justin accepts Christ as the criterion of the values and truths of the previous religious life.

(2) A second important theological key point in our theme - that have not often heard during different discussions in the WCC - is found in a phrase of St. Basil the Great, as he extends the notion of *spermatikos Logos* not to the logical part of the human being, but for the human possibility for becoming familiar with good. The love of God is self-taught, but at the same time with the coming into being of living creatures, that is human beings, there is the *spermatikos Logos* that is planted within us which possesses from the inside the motive for becoming familiar with good. The vision to see *spermatikos Logos* not only in human reason, but in the capacity for love as well, also opens a new horizon for understanding people of other faiths for they live in such or the other way also this dimension of love.

In light of this thought, I rediscovered in a stronger way the Johannic thought: "beloved, let us love one another for one is of God and he who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7). Of course the Christian message is completed in the verses that follow (9-12). Where even sparks, or expressions of love are found in a person, in society or in a culture, God is at work. If we love, God abides in us and His love is perfect in us. Love, its unexpected application in unexpected situations, remains the criterion in the last judgement when the Lord of love, the incarnation of love, the Son of man, comes in glory for his last universal judgement, having gathered before him not only Christians, but all nations. That means, among others, that every human being has inherent in him/her self the possibility and responsibility for loving, the possibility to be in relation with the Triune God, to be a being in community, to be in unknown contact with the one who is love.

(3) A basic theological conviction - underlined since St. Paul and by many church fathers - was expressed emphatically by St. Gregory of Nazianzus, when he stated that all human beings are driven by a yearning for God and a desire to find him. Everyone possesses a capacity for primal knowledge of God by the intellect, which St. Gregory considers as *theoides (kata theon)*, that means godlike, of God, and divine. Religious experience, I would venture to say, has biological roots in the living relationship of God with the first man and woman, according to the image of God (the *kat' eikona theou*), which was not destroyed at the fall, but which remains forever a receptor of God's will and presence. Through this approach we can understand better all the religiosity that has to do with the wisdom experience, especially with the religiosity in the East that has not immediately to do with a prophetic message, but with the search and the wisdom revelation.

(4) Another significant factor in theological understanding of the good will and acts of every person could be also found in the following thought of St. Maximus the Confessor: "The God Logos of God the Father is secretly (*mysticōs*) present in everyone in his commandments. Then there is presence of Christ in his commandments. Therefore, he who receives one divine commandment and fulfils it, receives God's Logos, who is present in it." We dare to say that every person of good will and intention who keeps

the divine commandments of Christ such as genuine love, humility, forgiveness, selfless service to other people, accepting suffering, even if he has not the privilege to know directly the ineffable mystery of Christ secretly (*mysticôs*), receives Christ the Logos, who is present in the commandment. Since God is love, everything that is an expression of love is a spontaneous tuning to his will and commandments.

In the same passage St. Maximus extends the mystical bond between Christ and his commandments to the holy Trinity, because God the Father is absolutely united with his Logos by his divine nature (*kata physin*). Then everyone who has received the Logos through the commandments has received together with him the Father who is in him and has also received, together with the Logos, the Spirit as well who is in the Logos. And after making reference to John 13:20, St. Maximus the Confessor concludes: "thus he who has received a commandment and fulfilled it has secretly (*mysticôs*) received in him the holy Trinity".

I believe that a further exploration of this vision in relation to St. Basil's extension of the *spermaticos Logos* to the possibility of human beings to become familiar with the good and, furthermore, the prolongation of this possibility to the human communities can open some horizons for a general theological understanding of the mystery of the lives of people of other faith.

### **Christological and pneumatological considerations**

Speaking more personally in this short meditation on the Orthodox spiritual and theological experience, I would like to note two main points:

(i) Christians in the East have often lived within societies having cultural, linguistic and religious pluralism. Thus they developed an attitude of respect, tolerance and understanding towards other religious experiences. They have also developed, in order to sustain their own faith, a firm eucharistic, doxological certainty about the decisive central role of Christ, the Logos and *Kyrios* in the whole universe. Since for us Christ is the absolute one, there is no need to diminish the others in order to exalt his magnificence. His greatness, always revealed in the mystery of humility and love, does not despise anyone and anything, but shows the truth that exists even in the most simple inspiration within the history and the world.

In an analogous way, our living experience of Christ, our longing to be united with him, does not await any enmity for anyone who has ever and anything whatsoever or any arrogance to embody. But on the contrary, it gives us freedom from any preconceived views or fear. It gives us an infinite love which, like a strong magnet, discovers even the particles of love, that exist among the piles of religious ideas, shapes and symbols. It collects them, respects their doxological disposition and rejoices at the mystical life that penetrates through the darkest folds of human history on both personal and universal fields. In this the emphasis is on the resurrected one, the ascended one who will come again, the first and last, the *protos and*

*eschatos*, the Lord and the Logos of the cosmos, the contemplation of the work of the Logos before the incarnation and after it.

(ii) My second point is on understanding Christ not by our own historical analysis, but in this contemplation and prayerful longing for him and saying by the Spirit: come Spirit and guide us in this effort to understand Christ. We cannot proclaim Christ the Lord, but only in the Spirit. This is clear in the New Testament. And the participation of the Holy Spirit is fundamental in the mystery of the incarnation of our Saviour and in the birth and life of this mystical body, the Church. That means that it is also fundamental to the incarnation of our faith inside us to find Christ and also to build the mystical body of the Church. The manifestation of the presence of the Triune God in all the universe and in time and eternity occurs through the continuous energy of the Holy Spirit.

"Present everywhere and filling all things", in the words of the prayer preceding almost all Orthodox services, the Holy Spirit continues to act for the sanctification of all persons and the fulfilment and completion of the salvation of the whole world: as the Spirit of holiness transferring the breath, love and power of the trinitarian God to the human existence and the universe; as the Spirit of power, dynamically renewing the atmosphere in which human beings live and breath (it is the Holy Spirit who burns up whatever is rotten - concepts, ideas, institutions, customs, demonic structures - and offers new energy for the transforming and renewing of all things in creation); as the Spirit of truth, working and inspiring human beings in their longing and search for truth in any religious setting every aspect of truth, including scientific, related to human life (this revelation of truth culminates in the decisive knowledge of the mystery of Christ who is the truth par excellence and it is the Spirit that reveals Christ); as the Spirit of peace calming the hearts and helping to create new relationships among human beings, bringing understanding and reconciliation to the whole of humankind; as the Spirit of justice giving inspiration and power for people to long and to struggle for peace.

The theological thinking that can be developed in the direction of the pneumatology needs special attention, as well as theological sensitivity and precision, because the terms *ruah*, *pneuma*, *pneumata*, spirit, ghost, are used in the Bible with various shades of meaning. And in many cases it is questionable whether they really refer to the Holy Spirit. Moreover the term "spirit-spirits", and the equivalent in hundreds of other languages, possesses an inconceivable multiformity and semantic connotation. In our time, also in the Christian world, it is used to convey a variety of meanings. In order to avoid slipping into vague ideas and acrobatic exercises and theories, Christian pneumatology needs to have a constant reference to the christological and trinitarian dogmas. Therefore it was very significant to me that in the morning I had the opportunity to talk about this prayer in Ephesians, which really is an extraordinary part of how St. Paul prayed for his own people when they were in another religious experience: "For these reasons I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in

heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of His glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through His spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the Saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:14-19).

### **Witnessing to Christ: "Martyria"**

This brings us to the third part of my meditation on our witness. Our witness is not an intellectual analysis of our beliefs, of our understanding, but it is in this line of prayer that the mystery of the love of Christ and of the love of God is revealed. The liturgical and theological experience of the Church moves constantly around these two axes: the incarnation of the word and the second coming of Christ, the incarnational fact and the eschatological vision. The concern of the Triune God is not limited of course to one part of humanity, the Christians, but embraces all people, the whole creation (*ta panta*) in a mysterious way, not clearly revealed to us. So, if we want to enter into the ineffable *koinonia* of love of the Holy Trinity, to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge and be filled with all the fullness of God, we have, in all humility, to keep our eyes, our thoughts and hearts open to this reality, to this mystery.

As mentioned earlier, I have always experienced difficulty with the word "mission". Even as a member of the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), I had proposed the word "*martyria*", which I find clearly in the New Testament: "... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Especially because in this "*martyria*" there is above all a personal experience: I saw something, I know something and I give my witness, my *martyria*; I am so sure of this witness that I am even ready to give my blood: not to give my blood in war, but to give my blood and accept suffering for my own weakness and my own certainty.

Therefore, today we have to see witness in a global perspective and as a common concern and responsibility of the Christian Church. We can no longer isolate cases -for instance Europe or the Middle East - without taking into account what is happening in other parts of the world. We are obliged "*to act in local context keeping a universal and eschatological perspective*" (this is an expression that we used many times in our circles in the CWME). Theologians in particular are obliged to remember that they are not independent groups of intellectuals involved in an abstract dialogue, but are living members of the universal Church and must therefore keep their hearts and minds open to its whole experience and suffering.

Dialogue and witness, local and universal, go together in our days. Dialogue



is only a way and not the end of the religious search. In the last analysis, the essence of the religious problems is the issue of ultimate reality, of ultimate truth of transcendence, and nobody has the right or the interest to castrate this force of human existence in order to assure a peaceful coexistence in the name of unifying common denominator, an attitude that brings an ideological smoothing down. In this perspective the essential contribution, I believe, of Christians is not to avoid but to point at their own particularities and deeper spiritual experiences and certainties.

In every authentic search, dialogue and encounter, always comes forth a critical moment when we touch the real issue which makes the difference. In the story of the encounter of St. Paul with the Athenians, after the dialogue St. Paul had the opportunity for direct witness. In his address, after having referred to the common religious ground, St. Paul proceeds to the crucial kernel of the Gospel: Christ and the Resurrection (*Christos kai anastasis*). This message was completely outside the ancient Greek cosmological system and militated not only against the popular, highly intricate polytheism, but also against the refined atheism of the epicurean philosophers and the pantheism of the stoics. Shattering the concept of a closed world system, self-powered, working autonomously and impersonal, he brought the message of the action of a personal God who had created the universe from a void, who provides for and intervenes decisively in history. In contrast to the concept of an automatically functioning world, stress was thus placed on freedom and love, which are activated in a community of God and humankind, and then of persons living in Christ within the Church.

With this paradox, which for the Athenians approached the point of irrationality, St. Paul proposed a new type of reasoning. He proposed a radical revision of Greek wisdom with the acceptance of two new central points in the course of the universe; those of Jesus and the Resurrection. Here we have a clear example of understanding of and respect for the old religious concepts in dialogue and at the same time of transcending them with the power of truth of Christian revelation. But of course the Christian message cannot be minimized for the sake of dialogue or any other interest.

Further to my last remark concerning our martyria-witness: we possess the testimony of a personal experience and certainty, we witness our faith not as a concept or even mental discovery, but as a gift of God's grace and power. An underestimation or suspension of this personal witness would mean negation of the gospel.

Dialogue has to do mainly with understanding the reason and everything that is derived from it: conceptions, insights, spiritual definitions, clarifications. But mission has also to do with this power, the *dynamis*, the power of God in history. To know him by his power is a witness, the personal existential experience of the resurrection to know him and the power of the resurrection, to share in his suffering, become like him in his death. You cannot speak about Christ if you do not have a personal encounter with him

in suffering, accept his suffering and participate in his suffering. The final Christian aim is to share in his life and glory. It is about a personal knowledge that comes through love; a knowledge that is being prolonged and continuously extended in an overflow of love. Then Christian witness is not an overwhelming effort. It is a spontaneous expression of this love for Christ and for others: who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (Rom. 8:35)

This encountering of the absolute *agape* of the personal Triune God in a loving process remains the deepest Christian experience and is absolutely related to authentic Christian witness and evangelism. Love liberates many inner powers, opens new horizons to life that the mind cannot imagine. If we really believe that the most precious gift is that of being in Christ, we cannot keep this deep experience to ourselves. This would be the highest injustice. Then for Christians *martyria* is not simply obedience or important activity. It is a joyful acceptance of God's love, an expression of love for him, an active sharing in his witness and identification with him. It is an inner necessity, it belongs to our self-understanding. "Necessity is led upon me...", is the expression of St. Paul, "woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" ((1 Cor. 9:16). It is an inner necessity for the faithful and for the Church. If we refuse it, we don't merely avoid a duty, we deny ourselves.

The Church, being the sign and the sacrament of the Kingdom in the world, the first fruit of the new humanity transfigured by the Spirit, has to radiate this life to the whole creation. It cannot be a self-closed community. Everything that she possesses or bequeaths is on behalf of the whole of humanity. Witness can start in silence through participating in the pain of others and announcing the Gospel in a rhythm of joy, reaching its peak in celebration. Its aim remains the creation of eucharistic communities in new places where people celebrate the sacraments of the Kingdom, the sacrament of the suffering of the resurrection in their special local cultural context, radiating the presence and glory of God to the concrete area. This joyful doxological community receives and transfers the grace of God in acts of participation in the suffering and need of anybody and everybody for human dignity and life. Mission cannot be confined to offering education, health-care and means for external development. It has to offer to everyone, especially to the poor and the oppressed, the faith that every human being has in Christ a unique value, that that being is created in the likeness of God, that our destiny is to become Christ-like, to partake in his divine glory. This is the basis for every other expression of human dignity. This offers the most dignified anthropology, which surpasses every type of humanistic vision. Whether people accept or reject it is their own free choice and responsibility.

Witness is direct participation in the process of the new creation, which has been realized already in Christ and is to be fulfilled in the eschaton. If the Church denies or suppresses it, it denies itself.

# PARTICIPANTS' REPORT

## Preamble

"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!...For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:33,36)

The One God, from whom all things come, has in Jesus Christ created and redeemed all that is and through the Spirit draws all things together, that in God there might be a community of reconciliation encompassing all peoples and the world God has made.

The Christian community constituted by God's Spirit through the gospel enjoys the first fruits of this life in the eucharist and in its pilgrimage of faith. As such it is called to bear witness in faith and life to this reconciliation in a world that is too often fractured and alienated, living amidst all kinds of oppressions. As part of its calling it joins with all others of good will, including communities that live from and by a different faith, to give expression to this reconciliation in concrete situations of life, and with others to critique both its failures and that of others, animated by the hope of God's gift of final reconciliation and community.

This report affirms the spirit and general direction of WCC statements about witness and dialogue, especially as articulated by the San Antonio conference and the Canberra Assembly. It is written with reference to the Baar Statement, suggesting directions for future theological considerations.

Contributions to our discussion by participants from many regions of the world renewed our awareness of religious diversity as a seminal reality in the historical and contemporary experience of the human community. While this can be a source of spiritual and social renewal for human communities in the global struggle for justice, peace and the integrity of creation, it can also be a force for destruction. The migration of peoples between countries and continents, the proliferation of new religious movements, the rise of various forms of fundamentalism point to a crucial need for positive inter-religious relations.

Our conversations concentrated around three foci: theological approaches to religious pluralism; the Christian community in/amidst other believing communities; understanding of and witnessing to Jesus Christ in a pluralistic world. The following issues were identified.

## 1) Religious Diversity

Today there is an increasing complexity of religious diversity in the world which highlights both the destructive and creative capacity of religions and which shapes the contexts in which the church witnesses to God in Christ. With this reality in mind there is a need for:

- a deeper theological understanding of religion as a dynamic of human experiences of transcendence;
- new understandings of the diversity of religion-culture relationships, especially as experienced by religious communities in two-thirds of the world;
- a prophetic analysis of the religion-politics matrix within a commitment to the poor and the liberation of the oppressed. We need common action to motivate Christian communities to open up relations with others, specifically in order to answer the call for social justice;
- a dialogue with secular disciplines of thought and socio-anthropological analysis in examination of human religious experience.

Directions taken must be mindful that any exploration is grounded in the indigenous experience of faith communities, with attention to popular expressions of piety, narratives, symbols, social ethics, in priority to textual and creedal formulations. One needs to be sensitive to both orthopraxies and folk religiosity as well as to orthodoxy. There is also a need to be alert to the complex levels of globalization of culture, and of various indigenous reactions of affirmation/rejection/adaptation.

## 2) Religious Pluralism

Pluralism denotes our positive but critical affirmation of religious diversity as a potentially enriching feature of human experience within God's providence.

We need, in faithful interpretation of the Gospel, a more thorough theological exposition of God's universal creative/salvific presence.

We suggest that these specific issues be particularly considered: theological anthropology, redemption, the presence of the Holy Spirit without and within the church, the relationship of church and ultimate fulfilment of God's reign.

Directions taken must be mindful of engaging these issues in light of the faith perspectives of all religious traditions, noting that we may discover aspects which nuance and enrich Christian life and theology. We must develop criteria for discerning the fruits/energies of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-3) at the same time respecting the "otherness of other faiths" and holding firm to the specificity of the historical Jesus and the eschatological hope that God's reign frees all humanity and human society to renewed relationship in Truth. The church should also become a creative force in other culture(s) by way of participation and mutual critique.

### 3) Identity

Within our religiously-plural world it is essential that we define our selfhood, identity and specificity as a Christian community. We can only do so in relationship with and knowledge of "the other".

We need to promote honest self-criticism among Christians as a source of strength from which new self-understandings and relationships may grow, even though this may be misinterpreted by some as weakness and vulnerability.

We need to continue to reflect on conversion in terms of the relationship between a dynamic process of turning to God which may be evident in all faith communities, and the specific response to the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Conversion from one religious community to another is not and should not be considered the goal of inter-religious dialogue.

Directions must foster greater awareness on the part of the WCC, and other church bodies, of their Christian identity in relation to other faith communities. Is it possible to consider applying the paradigm of "koinonia" to the Christian community's relationship with others?

### 4) Communication

As, in the name of God, we translate analysis of religious diversity into critical affirmation of religious plurality, we must continue to reflect on ways of engaging with people of other faith communities. We need to emphasize:

- ethics of non-violent protest against destructive uses of religions;
- participation in a contemporary search for a shared ethical foundation for religious cooperation, especially around issues of human rights, social justice, peace and ecological concerns;
- explore the symbols, stories and activities which comprise religions and in some cases creeds.

Directions should include a sympathetic recognition of diverse ways in which churches experience religious pluralism, often as a threat to survival, as well as an opportunity for creative encounter. We need to create awareness by challenging regional/local inter-Christian bodies so that they may help educate and empower local Christian communities to relate to other communities of faith and worldviews.

### 5) Witness

We are committed to an understanding of and witnessing to the universal relevance of Jesus Christ as articulated in the Scriptures and ecumenical creeds. We are aware that there are multiple contexts in which this witness

is borne, and that there have been and continue to be many differing understandings of Jesus Christ within the church.

We need to initiate a reflection on the implications of martyrria within a pluralistic world which have been attested to throughout the history of the Christian church; this will also include a reflection about being, like Jesus, present to the suffering and oppressed.

We need to promote a study of, and most of all a dialogue among the churches, about the fact that there are - as there always have been - varying understandings of, and therefore witnesses to, Jesus Christ, and that it is appropriate that there be varying acceptable understandings.

We need to engage in a similar study of and reflection on the varying understandings of Jesus Christ in other faith communities. Such a study can only enrich Christians in positive and negative ways, as the past orthodox and heretical understandings of Jesus Christ analogously have done.

These tasks should be undertaken in such a way as to bring together observers and scholars from the various churches and secular institutions and, where appropriate, from other faith communities.

## 6) Dialogue

Dialogue is a particular kind of communication which reaches beyond tolerance to appreciation, seeking enrichment of religious self-understanding and solidarity in social change. While urging dialogue wherever possible, we recognize that there are situations where it cannot yet take place, or where it may even be inappropriate.

We need to:

- develop an understanding of dialogue as a specific ministry of the church, discrete among ecumenical vocations, neither to be subsumed under evangelism, nor to restrict other forms of Christian witness with which it is in relationship;
- deepen the reflection on the nature of this ministry through the metaphor of pilgrimage, as we learn to walk together with people of other faiths;
- explore the relationship of repentance and dialogue in such ways as may invite reciprocity among persons of other faiths; explore the possibilities of spiritual dialogue through appreciation of/participation in the symbols, poetry, narratives and prayers of other faith communities;
- give special attention to non-polemical discernment of syncretism, discriminating different ways in which it effects all indigenous forms of Christianity, recognizing that it is an organic means for certain groups to live in dialogue between faiths. We must be sensitive to inappropriate borrowing from other faith communities.

These tasks are to be engaged by way of reflective practice, it being impossible to talk about dialogue except through the experience of dialogue.

We need to be sensitive to learning from people who express their Christian identity in culturally-indigenized ways as, e.g. Hindu Christian or Jewish Christian.

### 7) Destination

We conceive the eschatological mystery of the fullness of God's reign in ways which include the whole of history and the whole cosmos. That is why we want to:

- renew attention to a theology of history;
- renew attention to a theology of creation, and our responsibility as stewards of creation;
- focus on a hermeneutic of scripture which centres upon universal insights of the Bible and other sacred books;
- think creatively within the tension of the present (already) and future (not yet) tenses of God's consummation of the work of creation; and
- beware of the temptation to reduce others to Christian categories of faith, causing them harm and being dishonest to the Gospel.

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# BIBLE STUDIES

## *THE SIGNIFICANT OTHER*

- Kajsa Ahlstrand -

As I was looking at the title of this consultation the words began to float and swirl around - as often happens when you fix your eyes on something and let your mind wander. Two words stood out from the rest and took on a new meaning: "significance", "other" became "significant other". The faiths of the world seen as significant others in relation to the Christian faith. The term "significant other" denotes a slightly illicit relationship, but taken literally it stands for the person who is dear to you, important to you in such a way that you would be less of a person without this significant other. The legal arrangements regarding the relationship are not clearly defined and should not be defined either. Without significant others our lives would be poorer, less human. In the relationship with a significant other we can become what we are, and discover things about ourselves which we have managed to hide from others and even from ourselves. The significant other brings out the best and the worst in us. She or he will always remain other, we are not the same person, but this very otherness is a presupposition for her or his significance. On the very spot where the other is significant to me the otherness does not separate us from each other. When I allow the other to become significant to me I will not be able to relate to the world in exactly the same way as I did before: the significance of the other will colour the way I perceive reality.

If this is what happens when human beings become significant others to each other, what will happen to the Christian community if we allow communities of other faiths to become significant others to us? In some ways this is happening already. There are Christians who are married to persons of other faiths, examples of the fact that a significant other person and a significant other faith can be one and the same. The joys and struggles and experiences of these couples ought to be drawn into our common Christian heritage. I am convinced that many of us have experiences of encountering "the other faith" in such a way that the other has become a significant other. It is, however, not only on a personal level that we may perceive our faiths as significant others. I would think that one of the tasks of this consultation is to find out if and how the religions of the world can be seen as significant others to the Church.

When I began to formulate the thoughts about the significant other and also thought about where in the biblical scriptures there are traces of this significant other, I put the question as "who is my significant other?" and realized that this very question is found in the Bible in the form of the



question "who is my neighbour?" We recall the story: "a certain lawyer" put Jesus to the test by asking him what he should do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answered by asking what this man read in the Law: to love God above everything and thy neighbour as thyself. But the man wanted to justify himself and asked further, "who is my neighbour?" As an answer follows the story of the good Samaritan which ends with another question: "Which of these three, do you think, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?" The significant other to the robbed and wounded man was the Samaritan, the man of the other faith. The application of the story does not end here. The Fathers of the Church identified the Samaritan with Christ. It is Christ who is healing and saving the wounded human race. His means are the oil of the baptism or confirmation; and the wine of the Eucharist. If Christ can be seen as the Samaritan, have we paid enough attention to his "Samaritaness"?

Christ is the Significant Other, "Other" as in "Other Faiths" to the wounded humanity or the wounded Church. Is it possible that he is at work, not only helping, healing and saving people who belong to "other faiths", but also helping and healing the Christian community as the Other, when another religion becomes the significant Other to us? The point is certainly not to tell "the others" that Christ is at work among them, that kind of thinking does not respect the otherness of the other. The moment the other religion becomes the Significant Other, that is when the relationship with the other changes the way we relate to God and other people and the world, this change may be the work of Christ as the Other.

As I understand it, we are not here to determine in what ways Christ might be dealing with the faithful in other religions. Our task is to see the significance of the other for the Christian faith. As Christians we can never bypass Christ for another, but maybe, in taking the other faith seriously, it may become a significant Other to us, to our faith.

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## ***EPHESIANS, 2:12-22***

**- Fr. Sebouh Sarkissian -**

Good morning and may the peace of the Lord be with you.

"So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision' - a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands - remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God."

I have chosen this passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians because of its special inner meaning which is somehow related to the work that we are doing here. As you can see, Paul draws our attention to a very significant point which is the distinction made between the Gentiles and Jews, on one hand, and on the other, the hopeless status of Gentiles since they had no hope of the Messiah and were called 'uncircumcision'. Therefore, they were also strangers and had nothing to do with the society of Israel.

But when Jesus came things changed: **"You who were once far off have been brought near, at the price of the blood of Christ. For it is he who is our peace, it is he who made both Jew and Gentile into one and who broke down the middle wall of the barrier between"**. Yes, in Christ the barriers came down because both Jews and Gentiles, in common love of him, come to love each other. Thus peace was established at the price of Jesus' blood. Jesus removed the barriers and fences between man and man. He abolished the old rules and regulations upon which a religion could be founded and brought to men a new religion whose foundation is love.

Out of this love he made both Jew and Gentile into one new man. New in

quality. Here one has to bear in mind that Jesus does not make all Jews into Gentiles, or all Gentiles into Jews. He produces a new kind of person out of both. So Jesus achieved unity by making all men of all nations into Christians. This unity produces Christians whose Christianity transcends all local and racial differences, making all new friends with each other because they are friends with God. By this achievement the Gentiles are no longer foreigners but full members of the family of God.

Dear friends, from the very beginning of mankind the world has been full of barriers and fences, and so too is our modern world. In any Christ-less society there can be nothing but middle walls and partitions. That is why Jesus prayed "Holy Father, keep them in your name which you gave to me that they may be one, as we are one" (John 17:11). No doubt one of the most important aspects of life is unity. When one looks at the sky and sees the harmonious unity of the stars and the moon, it gives one real pleasure. We all know how destructive disunity is within a family, or a society or in a nation.

Looking back we see how right Jesus was. We all know that disunity divides and destroys - in fact it did so throughout the history of the Christian church - while unity constructs and we have tasted the fruits of unity as well. One of the main sources of unity is mutual understanding which leads people to live together in mutual respect and love. Therefore it is our burden today as Christians to witness the unity which Jesus had, and still has in his mind, and to express that unity in our daily life, in our family life, in society, and in assuming and performing our responsibilities in the society in which we live. As Christians we are asked today to love as God loved us, and pray as our Lord Jesus taught us, because love is our duty, prayer is our task and unity is our purpose.

Without prayer life loses its spirituality because prayer is one means of contact with God and also with our fellow man. Moreover, prayer is also a bridge to our forefathers and with those for whom we pray. Thus prayer strengthens us, it strengthens in us the firm belief that all mankind, regardless of faith, race and colour, are brothers and sisters.

Yesterday we were talking about the role of prayer in the life of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. Yes, for Muslims prayer is the core of their religious life and is one of the five pillars of Islam. In Judaism, prayer is one of the most dominant elements, in fact one of the rabbinic sayings goes: "he who prays within his house surrounds it with a wall that is stronger than iron". For Christians prayer is part and parcel of their Christian being. Jesus himself taught his disciples how to pray and put forward the way of prayer, prayer is an undeniable phenomenon in a Christian life. The first community of the followers of Jesus used to pray many times a day because for them prayer was a source of encouragement and strength (Acts 1:14). Prayer creates among believers a bond of love and mutual understanding which in its turn creates a sense of unity. Prayer is also a symbol of equality for all people who, without any racial, social and cultural discrimination stand before their

Lord. Prayer is a spiritual bridge which relates man to his fellow man, co-worker and friend no matter how far apart they may be. Prayer is a pilgrimage through which Christians are reminded of their covenant with God and refreshes their faith in him. Prayer is a step forward towards God's Kingdom, which is the main goal of any true Christian. Prayer is a vision through which man, the creature, praises his Lord and tries to work through that vision according to his mission. Last, but not least, prayer is God's activity in us rather than our activity in relation to God.

While reflecting about prayer and what Jesus actually taught us, I wonder how many Christians are actively and vividly expressing their faith. I think we have been admiring Jesus instead of following him. We have been talking about him, instead of partaking of him, committing our lives to him, walking with him. When we read the Gospel do we really listen his voice, do his words echo in our hearts and minds? The true Christian is he in whom Jesus lives. St. Paul says: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me". By listening to his voice, first of all, we will be able to look around us and talk to our friends and neighbours as members of the same family because we have become members of his body. As Paul puts it: "You are the body of Christ". Secondly, we will be aware of our Christian identity and out of this we will go to meet our fellow man as Jesus instructed us (Matth. 5:43).

I would like to conclude by recalling a very moving story told by a very well known scholar of the New Testament. It is a story about the war in France. Once some soldiers brought the body of a dead comrade to a French cemetery to have him buried. The priest told them gently that he had to ask if their comrade had been a baptised adherent of the Roman Catholic Church. They said that they did not know. The priest then said that he was very sorry but in that case he could not permit burial in his church-yard. So sadly the soldiers took their comrade and buried him just outside the fence. The next day they came back to see if the grave was alright and to their astonishment could not find it. While they searched the priest came and told them that his heart had been troubled because of his refusal to allow their dead comrade to be buried in his church-yard. So, early in the morning, he had risen from his bed and with his own hands moved the fence to include the body of the soldier who had died for his country. That is what love can do. Can we move towards each other out of our love for each other and to God - here is a challenging question for all of us. Lets think of it very seriously in order to understand the real meaning of it. Therefore I repeat the phrase that I used earlier: Love is our duty, prayer is our task and unity is our purpose.

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## ***Mark 7:24-30***

**- Nan-Jou Chen -**

The story of the dialogue between Jesus and the woman of Syria was also recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew, Ch. 15:21-28. Because of this, many interpreters take the issue of the greatness of faith as the core of these passages, and emphasize it. However, this certainly is not the only message in it. There are also scholars who take these passages as evidence for the need of Christian mission to Gentiles. I myself think the meaning of the story of Jesus and the woman of Syria has many dimensions. One of them is related to the theme of our consultation.

"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This is what Jesus said to the woman of Syria in Mark. The expression in Matthew is more rigid: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus' original thinking of salvation was based on the tradition from Israel, the people of God. And this viewpoint of the so-called people of God unfortunately excluded the one in need who should be cared for. But the woman of Syria in these passages challenged Jesus' traditional understanding of salvation and made Jesus change his mind. There are at least two aspects we should note. Firstly, Jesus changed his mind. It means that Jesus thought the definition of salvation could be redefined and the category of salvation could be enlarged. Secondly, Jesus' change of mind was based on a new understanding coming from a Syrophenician. Jesus learned the truth from a Gentile. It gives us an indication that a Gentile's religious understanding enriched the substance of Christian faith. These are messages from the Gospel which may sound strange to many traditional Christians.

The question of truth is always the most essential and most disputed question in the dialogues of different religions. We all know that the absolutism of truth and self-righteousness does not create dialogue. We must also be aware that saying all religions are equally true, is not the solution. The tradition of Israel is absolutely right, or it means nothing and does not matter? How did Jesus deal with the question of truth? I found it self-critical! The attitude of self-criticism made Jesus change his mind as he learned the truth from a Gentile woman. Self-criticism should also be our criterion for searching for truth, shouldn't it?

What sort of challenge put Jesus into this situation of self-criticism? Why did Jesus have to be self-critical? It is because the answer of the woman from Syria is an ethical issue, an issue of right and wrong, an issue of life and death. "Sir, even dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." the woman said. That "dogs" eat crumbs which fall from their master's table is not only a matter of "dogs' rights", but it is also essential to their survival.

All these are very essential and important ethical issues. The core of these ethical issues is Humanun. It is something about humanity. What Jesus did to the Syrophoenician was just the same as when he healed the sick on the day of the Sabbath and pronounced that the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. That is because healing the sick is an ethical imperative coming from a compassionate heart. This is something one cannot resist but must respond to. Even our Lord Jesus, the Son of God, had no other alternative.

Different religions, based on their own traditions and special beliefs, have different ethical teachings. This is quite natural and understandable. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the value and the dignity of humankind should be the criteria for all ethical teachings of all religions. Furthermore, the humanity should also be the criteria for religious dialogues in search of the truth and cooperation. The world situations today challenge every religion everywhere to seek cooperation in creating a world of justice, peace and integrity of creation. Therefore, searching for a basic or mutual ethical value and principle has to be one of the important themes of religious dialogue. I am also convinced that to reach a consensus in ethical value is urgent and comparatively easier than in religious truth.

Nowadays in Taiwan there is a very strong and large Buddhist movement. A Buddhist nun named Rev. Jeng Yen started a "compassion and relief" (Tzu Chi) ministry in 1966 with her few followers at a small village on the Eastern coast of Taiwan. Today, according to the report, the Foundation formed by the Tzu Chi movement has two million registered members, not to mention donors. It means that one-tenth of the Taiwanese joined Tzu Chi. This Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation established a hospital, junior nursing college, medical college and is now planning to build a university. It has many branches in at least 13 foreign countries. The charity missions and relief services done by the Tzu Chi people cover all corners of Taiwan and extend overseas. Even Christian social service institutions receive donations from Tzu Chi. Newspapers offer special columns, even the whole page, to report regularly on the life and ministry of Tzu Chi together with the Rev. Jeng Yen's sayings. Though some Christians complain that the motivation of these compassion and relief ministries is to earn merit (Kung Te), most Taiwanese Christians have no alternative but to recognize the spirit of compassion and the ministries of Tzu Chi. Archbishop Arinze from the Vatican came to visit the Buddhist Rev. Jeng Yen last July and affirmed the meaningful work of Tzu Chi. Rev. Jeng Yen told Archbishop Arinze that both the indiscriminate love (Po Ai) of the Catholic Church and the compassion (Tzu Pei) of Buddhism are similarly doing something from the love embracing the whole of humankind.

There is little dialogue between Christians and Buddhist in Taiwan. However, the Tzu Chi movement made Christian churches and Buddhist groups work together in many social activities such as "respecting life", "protecting human rights", "environmental protection", "rescuing young prostitutes", etc. The love and compassion for humankind brought different

religions together in the ministry of social concern in Taiwan. In other words, the ethical imperative guides different religions toward a common direction on a common path. I am convinced that this development will lead religious dialogues among different religions to a more profound stage and create more significant events in the near future.

An ethical question made our Lord Jesus self-critical of his own thinking about salvation and changed his mind to learn the truth from a Gentile woman. What should we do today?

Lord our God, grant us wisdom to discern the truth.  
Grant us a compassionate heart to respond to the request of need.  
Make us humble and self-critical that we may grow in your truth and love.

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*Nan-Jou Chen is Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at Tainan Theological Seminary and College. He is a member of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan.*

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## **MATTHEW 23:27-39**

**- S. Mark Heim -**

Friends, I have taken the somewhat hesitant decision to speak with you this morning not about a text whose meaning is fully clear to me or that I am confident is full of reassurance for us, but instead a text that embodies many of the questions I struggle with, many of the difficult cross currents in our discussion. I perhaps would not have been bold enough to do so if I had not heard in our conversations these days together echoes of the same concerns I have felt: the question of the shadow side of religion, the question of differences within one common faith tradition (our own) so deep and sharp that they seem at times the difference of life and death, the questions of how we are to understand Christ in our pluralistic environments.

Because these are difficult issues I request that if there are aspects of what I say that seem to you misguided or in error, you will disregard them. Instead if there is anything worthy, anything faithful, anything good, I ask you to focus on that.

There are many layers in the text I will read, but the one I want to pay close attention to bears on the death of Christ, which surely stands close to the centre of discussions of the distinctive character of Christianity, especially in connection with sacrifice or atonement. I call attention in this text to the terms in which the death of Jesus is prefigured and interpreted.

The passage is the so-called "woes on the Scribes and Pharisees" in Matthew 23:27-39. It is a text in the very middle of the shadow side of Christianity's relation to other faiths. It is a painful experience to read these verses. It is painful for us as Christians, for the words resound now with centuries of Christian antisemitism, of pogrom, bloodshed and holocaust.

But these words that have been turned to such evil ends - what do they say originally? Before reviewing our specific text, I would like to lift out a few lines in the chapter just preceding it. For instance:

- 23:8....you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher and you are all students.
- 23:9....call no one your father on earth, for you have one father - the one in heaven.
- 23:12...all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.
- 23:13...woe to you who lock people out of the kingdom of heaven.
- 23:15...woe to you who cross sea and land to make a single convert.
- 23:23...woe to you who tithe mint, dill and cummin and neglect justice, mercy and faith.



And then, our text itself, there are many layers in this text. I will mention several briefly:

- 1) At one level it is a denunciation of hypocrisy: you say one thing and do another.
- 2) It is an angry cry that justice and mercy are neglected.
- 3) It is a rejection of religious narrowness and exclusivism that puts its traditions and particularities above God's commandments.
- 4) It is a prefiguration of Jesus' death as like that of all those victimized and oppressed, that is, it interprets Christ's death in terms that are not unique.
- 5) It is a statement that the mechanism of violence against the innocent that justifies itself, reproduces violence by this very denial, the claim that "we were not involved".
- 6) It looks toward the rejection and persecution of Christians by Jews.
- 7) It probably reflects the knowledge of the destruction of Jerusalem, and the church's reflection on it.
- 8) And then, in the forefront of our minds there is the later use of this text by Christians to justify and exhort violence against the Jewish people...bringing the text tragically full circle so that now Christians kill the innocent ones, say one thing and do another, deny their responsibility.

My question is, how can something with so many good elements in it go so wrong?

I am of course aware of the argument that the Pharisees are being completely slandered in this passage, or at least their practices are being badly distorted. This is no doubt true to a significant extent. If this is so, it should certainly give us pause about the nature of our denunciations or those we may regard as narrow, hypocritical or unjust.

But there are two points I particularly want to stress.

The first is that the conflict and condemnations in this text spring from shared religious values. Jesus and the Pharisees and Jesus' disciples belong to the same religious family. They worshipped in the same synagogues, interpreted the same scriptures, had many of the same enemies. They were more like each other than most or all other Jewish parties of the time. It is what is the same that is appealed to as the most damning and imperative ground for conflict. If we are honest we know this is very frequently the case.

We know that the conflict in Matt. 23 and the Gospel of John was, at the time, a conflict within one religious tradition. One of the questions we must face is how much significance or weight we are willing to give those differences that cut across religious traditions or exist within one.

It will hardly do to have an understanding of the theological significance of religious diversity which applies only outside traditions and not inside them as well. But what then if we are convinced that there are differences over the nature of Christianity that amount to faithfulness or unfaithfulness? If

the difference between an absolutist, exclusivist form of Christianity and others is one of fundamental importance, or the difference between apartheid-affirming or apartheid-denying forms of Christianity, then must we not also clearly recognize the possibility of such radical conflict across religious boundaries? And how shall we face and understand these instances in interreligious relations or dialogue?

The second point, the one I wish to stress most particularly this morning, is that there is hardly any assertion in it of Christological uniqueness. Jesus figures here by implication, as Jesus figures explicitly in Stephen's speech in Acts, as one in a line of prophets persecuted and rejected. What is emphasized is not that he is something entirely new or unparalleled but that he is treated just as a line of others like Joseph or Moses.

Most startlingly of all, here Jesus is identified not only with the prophets but "with all the righteous blood shed on earth". From Abel (the first murder victim) to Zachariah (the last person murdered in the Scriptures) as they were ordered at the time of Jesus (Chronicles 24:20).

There is a way in which the Christian persecution of the Jews is rooted in a misreading of the death of Christ. The crucifixion is not a case of violence exercised against the perfect victim and so resulting in wonderful benefits. If that were the case, then it would only be reinforcing the magical machinery of sacrifice that looks always for a victim - the more innocent the better - in the conviction that power and stability can be assured by killing them.

It is this very sacrificial machinery that is condemned in Matt. 23 but which Christians historically reinstated with the equation: Christ is the necessary and perfect sacrifice who must die to save the world; it is wrong to kill the innocent; let us say the Jews killed Jesus; let's kill the Jews. But the equation ends with the need for yet another expiation, another scapegoat must be found for our killing of the Jews....some even suggest it should be Jesus as saviour who is sacrificed to satisfy the guilt.

But the New Testament points in a quite different direction. Where it does speak of the death of Christ as sacrifice, it is a sacrifice to end sacrifice of this sort. And what I want to particularly point out is that in the gospels there is a strong strand which is often ignored - a strand that affirms the "non-uniqueness" of Jesus' death. It is like that, even identified with that of all the righteous victims "from the foundation of the world".

The passion accounts are not hymns to redemptive violence but unflinching descriptions of a killing that ought not to take place. The mechanism is all laid bare - the unjust accusations, the imperial concern for calm in the streets, the agony of the execution. The twin of the centurion in Matthew who says at the death of Jesus "surely this was the Son of God" is the centurion in Luke who say "surely this man was innocent".

The passion is the old mythical story of redemptive violence and the divine victim whose blood fertilizes the biological and social established order, and whose killing itself required expiation. But now it is told from the point of view of the victim. And now the story says not that redemptive violence has made everything all right but that violence is not redemptive.

As we confess, the one victim who was truly divine made a way out of victimage for us all. For God has exalted and vindicated the victim, overcoming the powers of death, revealing and cracking open the whole machinery that justifies the sacrifice of the innocent, by death trampling on this structure of guilt, denial, scapegoating, violence, guilt, denial...and setting our feet on the path of peace.

Let it be so.

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**THE NEAREST IN AFFECTION**

*Towards a Christian Understanding of Islam*

Stuart Brown

The title of this book comes from the Quran (5:82): "You will surely find the nearest in affection to those who believe are the ones who say, 'We are Christians.'" After setting out the essential beliefs of Islam, the author looks at some points of contact for Christian-Muslim encounter (understandings of God, revelation and prophecy) and some "angles of divergence" (concepts of law, personal ethics and public policy). He then reviews six different ways of living together that have characterized Christian-Muslim relationships over the past fourteen centuries: conflict and confrontation, agreement and alliance, protection and propriety, respect and partnership, syncretism and supersession, pluralism and peace.

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**INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY**  
Compiled by John H. Berthrong

The booklet, *Interfaith Dialogue: An Annotated Bibliography*, has been prepared in response to the large number of people who are asking for some guidance in their approach to the increasingly large number of books and periodicals devoted to inter-religious understanding and cooperation. The project has been done keeping in mind what might be the needs of religious leaders, teachers in public schools, employers, and others who are confronted with both the opportunities and the challenges of growing cultural and religious diversity in the society where they live. Surely, this bibliography only suggests beginning points in this important understanding. Yet, those who use this annotated bibliography will undoubtedly find it of value.

Dr. John Berthrong was asked by Multifaith Resources to prepare this bibliography because in the North American context he is uniquely qualified to undertake this task. He is a recognized leader in the movement towards increased interfaith understanding and cooperation in North America, and around the world. His experience includes pastoral, denominational and academic responsibilities during the past 25 years. Each have been done in ways which have built bridges between individuals and communities of diverse traditions.

Those who would like a copy of this booklet should write to:

Rev. Charles R. White, D.Min.,  
President  
Multifaith Resources,  
P.O.Box 128  
Wofford Heights, CA. 93285-0128, USA

especially if you have ideas for materials that should be indicated in the next edition of the bibliography.

## BOOK REVIEW

Professor Arvind Sharma of McGill University, is the editor of a trilogy, **WOMEN IN WORLD RELIGIONS, TODAY'S WOMAN IN WORLD RELIGIONS,** and **RELIGION AND WOMEN,** all published by State University of New York Press.

**RELIGION AND WOMEN** discusses the position of women in the Native American, African, Shinto, Jain, Zoroastrian, Sikh and Baha'i faiths. The contributing scholars provide a discussion of the questions pertaining to women and religion in general.

**TODAY'S WOMAN IN WORLD RELIGIONS** examines how the women's movement is affecting traditional religions and civilizations throughout the world. It reviews cases of global impact in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Australian Aboriginal religion. Many of the authors are among the leading scholars in their fields and many issues addressed are of vital importance to the study of religion in general. This is not just a book about women, but about the interrelationship of women's roles and men's roles in religion and the formation of culture.

The Annual Review of **WOMEN IN WORLD RELIGIONS** offers a forum for discussion of contemporary trends, such as the influence of secularism, fundamentalism, or feminism on world religion.

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### CHRISTIANS AND THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust is an important part of Christian history and is not solely a traumatic and recent experience of the Jewish people. This booklet will provide Christian readers with resources for congregational study of the history of the Holocaust and of the theological and ethical questions it poses.

The booklet is a cooperative effort of the member denominations of the National Council of Churches, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Southern Baptist Convention. It is edited by Dr. Jay T. Rock, Co-Director of the NCCC's Office of Interfaith Relations.

The booklet, which costs US\$5.00, can be ordered from:

The Working Group on Interfaith Relations  
National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA  
475 Riverside Drive, Room 868  
New York, NY 10115, USA.



## NEW BOOK INFORMATION

**Hans Ucko**

### **COMMON ROOTS - NEW HORIZONS**

Learning about Christian Faith  
from Dialogue with Jews

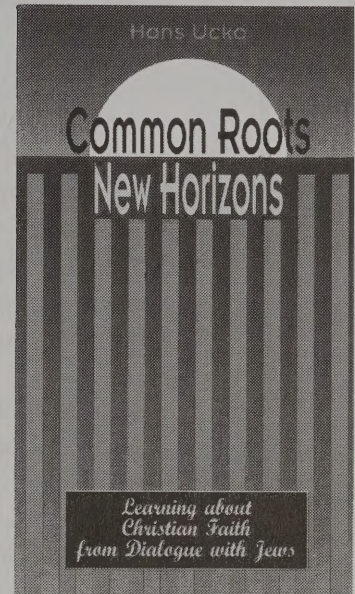
ISBN: 2-8254-1128-0

Paperback, 112 pp.

Price: Sfr. 12.50, US\$ 8.50, £ 5.75

Published: March 1994

*Risk Book Series No 61*



#### **The Book**

The Church and Christian theology are inextricably bound up with Judaism and the Jewish People. Jesus was a Jew. The first church was a Jewish church. The Christian faith was born in a Jewish setting and inherited the Jewish scriptures. But Christianity did not displace Judaism, and the continuing witness of the Jewish people has been an embarrassment to the Church.

After centuries of antisemitism, we have today a new climate of understanding and friendship, thanks largely to ecumenical initiatives in the area of dialogue. It is in this context that readers are invited to reflect on some of the central themes of the Christian tradition, conceived in the Old Testament and carried on in the New - themes such as the People of God, the Messianic hope, the Kingdom of God, what creation stands for, what election signifies and what it means to be human.

Common Roots - New Horizons is a disturbing book. It takes us back to our common roots, it questions ideas and beliefs that we take for granted. But it is also an exciting book because in that very process it opens up new horizons for Christian witness and service.

#### **The Author**

The *Rev. Hans Ucko* is executive secretary for Christian-Jewish relations and new religious movements in the World Council of Churches' Office on Inter-religious Relations.

**Orders to: WCC PUBLICATIONS, P.O. Box 2100, 1211 Geneva, Switzerland or your local bookseller**

## **International Interfaith Centre at Oxford, U.K.**

The International Interfaith Centre is a new established centre with the following aims as:

- an Education Centre to promote research into ways of developing interreligious understanding, cooperation and respect for religious freedom;
- a Coordinating Centre to facilitate cooperation between people and groups engaged in interreligious work;
- a Support Centre to strengthen personal contact between those engaged in interfaith work and the study of religions;
- a Spiritual Centre to provide opportunities for learning about prayer, worship and meditation in the world's religions.

The Centre has been initiated by the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), Westminster College, Oxford and the World Congress of Faiths (WCF).

The Centre will be a continuing legacy of The Year of Interreligious Understanding and Cooperation, which has marked the Centenary of The World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893.

**The International Interfaith Centre  
2 Market Street, Oxford OX1 3EF, U.K.  
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